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Estrangement in the Intentional Community of Stepford Suburb in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*

Ira Levin'in Stepford Kadınları *Romanında Kasıtlı Topluluk Olarak Stepford Banliyösünde Yabancılaştırma*

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Abstract: The concept of intentional community as a distanced geography or land which is estranged from the conventional and traditional social placement would be a convenient term to identify Ira Levin's Stepford suburb. The neighbourhood in *The Stepford Wives* is depicted as an imaginary ideal place where the life is idealized by the husbands, and from the patriarchal perspective, it is regarded as a good place to live. The men are satisfied and pleased with their domestic, obedient, always incredibly beautiful, and overjoyed wives. The husband-oriented wives who show no sign of exhaustion, who have no interest or hobby apart from staying at home and doing the housework, who are doll-like figures, and additionally the unrealistic and euphoric atmosphere at homes in Stepford create the factor of estrangement here. Thus, in this paper, the intentional community of Stepford in Ira Levin's literary work *The Stepford Wives* will be analysed by referring to Lucy Sargisson's work on "*intentional communities*" to shed a light on the estrangement concept and its social and literary role to raise awareness of woman liberation in a sarcastic way in the times the work is published.

Keywords: Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives,* Estrangement, Intentional Community, Woman Movement

Öz: Uzak bir coğrafya veya geleneksel toplum yerleşiminden uzak bir toprak olarak kasıtlı topluluk kavramı, Ira Levin'in Stepford banliyösü için uygun bir tanımlama olacaktır. *Stepford Kadınları* romanında tasvir edilen muhit, buradaki hayatın eril egemen bakışla idealleştirilmesi ve yaşanabilecek en iyilerden olması sebebiyle hayali bir ideal yer gibi tasvir edilmiştir. Erkekler, sürekli evde olan ve evle ilgilenen, inanılması güç biçimde güzel ve fazlasıyla mutlu olan eşlerin varlığından çok memnundurlar. Yorgunluk belirtisi göstermeyen, evde oturmaktan ve ev işi yapmaktan başka meşgalesi olmayan, oyuncak bebek benzeri karakterler olan, kocalarını hayatının merkezine koyan kadınlar ve Stepford evleri için tasvir edilen gerçekdışı ve keyif verici ortam aslında okuyucuda yabancılaşma benzeri bir etki yaratır. Bu nedenle de bu çalışmada Ira Levin'in *Stepford Kadınları* romanında Stepford yerleşkesi, Lucy Sargisson'ın "*kasıtlı topluluklar*" üzerine yaptığı çalışma ışığında incelenecek ve bu kasıtlı topluluk kurma anlayışında yabancılaş(tır)manın kadın özgürleşmesi ile ilgili farkındalığı artırmadaki etkisi hem toplumsal bağlamda hem de edebi anlamda yazıldığı döneme gönderme yapılarak tartışılacaktır.

***Anahtar sözcükler*:** Ira Levin, *Stepford Kadınları,* Yabancılaştırma, Kasıtlı topluluklar, Kadın Hakları Hareketi

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Introduction

The notion of establishing a society occupied with modified women and houses into perfection is the central idea behind the drastic transformation of the women to non-human robots in the Stepford suburbs in Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972). The concept of perfection embodies exaggeratedly theatrical happiness, flawless beautiful women, actressy smiling faces, extravagantly luxurious and comfortable houses, and pretentious movie-like family relationships. However, the notion of perfection mentioned here is not similar to and should not be mixed with the idea of "ideal" in utopian understanding or else it could be equalized to this "ideal" concept only if it is interpreted from a sarcastic perspective. 'Stepford Wife' is used as a term in American lexicon to denote an assumed perfection, and as Anne Williams emphasized, the title "*has become proverbial in popular culture*" with its connotations including a woman who is "*enslaved to a patriarchal definition of femininity, a wife who has no life, a wife who is almost literally an automaton*" (2007, 85). Like Williams, Elliott identifies the Stepford motif as "*a widely understood descriptor for a person showing the effects of ideological brainwashing*" (2008, 33). With its being adopted as a term or motif, *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin has attracted scholars from the perspectives of the posthumanist approach, artificiality, cyborg-machine type of characters, and also feminism (esp. second wave feminism). Another issue that is worth studying related to the novel is the setting, its utopian/dystopian spatiality which will be the main concern of this study. In the era that second wave feminism is at its birth and Women's Liberation is on its peak, Levin's Stepford suburb and the community established there portrays a patriarchal posthumanist intentional community which is seemingly utopian but realistically dystopian with its allegedly heaven-like atmosphere. The concept of estrangement is supposed to create a kind of utopian setting; however, as one of the questioning characters in the novel, Bobbie called, it is more of a "*Zombieville*" which is "*the Town That Time Forgot!*". The Stepford suburb is depicted like a cult where only families live; all men in the neighbourhood go to the Men's Association, even at nights; all women have only one purpose in life which is cleaning their houses and pleasing their husbands. All members of this community are allocated specific roles and there is no individuality or no individual differences, no personal choices or decisions. The exclusion of any individual emphasis strengthens the impact of collectively shared values and communal commitments in this suburb.

The author of the novel depicts an archaic image of an "*Angel in the House*" where women are initially liberated so as to show the paradoxical situation between the reality of the 1970s and the still "*patriarchal*" mentality then which is not ready for an independent image of a woman, yet. Kotani's comment on the first film version of the novel (1975) gives a general idea on the aim of the writer, Ira Levin. Kotani says that "*at the very height of the women's movement in America; its heroine undergoes an experience that is like travelling back in time to a past that is the complete opposite of women's liberation*" (2007, 50). This is the sarcastic perspective of Levin because he also integrates this anachronistic mode in the plot of his novel as well by portraying a patriarchal, non-egalitarian, pro-masculinist, anti-feminist fictional setting in a pro-women liberation factual setting. In his work "Do Dystopias Matter?", Lyman Tower Sargent clarifies his interest in eutopias rather than dystopias by saying, "*dystopia has for me always had a strong connection to the 'reality' I wanted to avoid, a 'reality' that to me needed eutopia to change it*" (2013, 10). The feeling that Levin creates in this novel reminds this point since it presents a kind of "reality" to be avoided rather than an imaginary world to be pursued (this is exactly the opposite of what Sargent emphasises as what is needed).

The novel is adapted into film and it has two different versions (1975 and 2004), but

interestingly, most of the arguments and articles, critiques, reviews are written on these film versions rather than focusing on the original work. The reason behind this emphasis on the movie adaptations rather than the literary work could be attributed to the popularity or the approach of these movies to the issues dealt with. The first film adaptation goes back to 1975 which is very close to the publishing date of the book, and the second one is in 2004 which is a comparatively recent version. In this study, the book will be the main focus of the argument, but film adaptations can be checked as well to see the change in the perception of feminism or the gender concept in a larger frame through time.

Stepford Neighbourhood as an Intentional Community and the Role of Estrangement

As the first scene or sentence of each novel is very significant for the initial depiction on the reader's mind, Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* begins with the depiction of the Welcome Wagon lady that became a popular figure around 1930s as a symbol of American welcoming tradition. To describe the welcoming gesture for the newcomers to this community, the first moment is depicted as follows:

> *The Welcome Wagon lady, sixty if she was a day but working at youth and vivacity (ginger hair, red lips, a sunshine-yellow dress), twinkled her eyes and teeth at Joanna and said, "You're really going to like it here! It's a nice town with nice people! You couldn't have made a better choice!"* (Levin 2000, 3).

This Welcome Wagon lady inspired Levin as the initial figure to appear in the novel is a reference to the actual Welcome Wagon company, a type of service that was founded by Thomas Briggs in Memphis, Tennessee in 1928. Briggs "*hired 'hostesses', women who were friendly and knowledgeable about their neighbourhood, to personally deliver baskets of gifts supplied by local businesses to new homeowners*" ("Welcome Wagon: Our History"). On the website of this company, it is noted that this "*one of the first all-female companies in the United States"* stopped the home visits in 1998 to replace it with digital welcoming services "*as an increase in two-income families meant fewer people were home to accept visits*". Hence, Levin takes this concept to present a contrary image of two women; the Welcome Wagon lady who seems to be a working woman outside the house versus Joanna, the newly arrived, seemingly independent woman who is initially depicted in the house.

The above given opening excerpt from the novel gives a picture of two striking images; one is the almost shining physical appearance and energetic mood of the woman at her sixties, and the other is the description of the setting as "*a nice town with nice people*". How nice it is and whether there is no better choice as she stated would be the nightmarish side of the life in Stepford for the newly arrived woman. The newcomers are also introduced to the community by means of an interview on the local papers *Stepford Chronicle*'s "Notes from Newcomers" where Joanna, the main character, talks about her interest in tennis, photography, also *"in politics and in the Women's Liberation movement,"* and she enthusiastically adds that her husband is interested in these as well to underline the supporting husband role in terms of women rights (Levin 2000, 5). However, the initial picture of this ostensibly supportive husband turns to become one of the men who seemingly support women but were fed up with the individuality, freedom, personal choices, and the strength of their wives, so that they planned to transform the self-actualised successful women to the old-fashioned concept of the perfect feminine one. Politically and socially women were in such a position in the 1960s and 1970s that male characters in the novel searched for alternative ways to suppress women, and this became the

robotic modification of the female characters. Veena Das elucidates the motivating factors of the Stepford suburb as follows: "*It is the combination of patriarchal organization of power, eroticization of commodities, and use of scientific technology which gives Stepford homes that peculiar, picture-book quality, and the women bodies that neither sweat nor age, while their minds are completely tied to detergents and floor waxes*" (1988 n.p.). As there is no internalized submissive femininity anymore but there is woman liberation, the men looked for an alternative solution in technology rather than psychology or sociology.

While men planned the subordination of women by means of robotics, another point to be strategically planned has been the location, setting since it could not be possible in the new liberal environment of the States in the 1970s. The Stepford suburbs, therefore, reveal an example of intentional communities with its isolated and closed setting, but at the same time ironically external and open setting. The thoughts of the subservient and domestic wives or their self-perception show what kind of women the men in Stepford want, what kind of life these men want, and what kind of perspective they have related to life and gender roles. When Joanna visits Carol to talk about founding a woman club or anything like this, Carol says that she has no time because she is too busy with the housework. Her reply exactly represents the mentality of the husbands in Stepford as she explains, "*Ted's better equipped for that sort of thing than I am, […]. And men need a place where they can relax and have a drink or two*" and women do not (Levin 2000, 32). Her explanation indicates the imposed gender difference and also the roles in the husband-wife relationship: the woman is the inferior whereas the man is the superior one in this relationship.

In his article "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," Lyman Tower Sargent works on many definitions of terminology related to utopian studies, and one of these terms is intentional community which he defines "*as a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose*" (1994, 15). Sargent delves into the boundaries of this definition by focusing on intent, a shared common goal or vision, and also "*a minimum number of members and the requirement that they come from more than one nuclear family*" (1994, 15). An earlier study that Sargent also refers in his article is written by Rosabeth Moss Kanter on communities in which Kanter emphasises that utopian communities are "*voluntary, value-based, communal social orders*" (1972, 2). Kanter elucidates on what she means, as follows: "*Because members choose to join and choose to remain, conformity within the community is based on commitment – on the individual's own desire to obey its rules – rather than on force or coercion*" (1972, 2). The common point of Sargent and Kanter in their definitions of communities is their emphasis on consent and a shared purpose. Commitment and personal choice rather than being forced to be a part of this community bring along sustainability for the established communities. The shared values or the common purpose of intentional communities can be illustrated with religious, ethnic, spiritual, artistic, political or any other motive.

Recently, Lucy Sargisson works on intentional communities and states that she does not focus on utopia in terms of its literary value, but she treats "*intentional communities as utopian experiments*" (2007, 393). In this study, Sargisson's work will be referred to as a basis to strengthen the argument in both theoretical and practical terms. Sargisson talks about estrangement, which is originally argued by Darko Suvin. In the chapter "Estrangement and Cognition" in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre,* Suvin explains the concept of "estrangement" by referring to the term "*ostranenie*"

introduced by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky and "*underpinned by an anthropological and historical approach in the work of Bertolt Brecht, who wanted to write 'plays for a scientific age'*" (1979, 6). The main purpose of Brecht while using this technique is to "*recognize*" the subject, but also to make the subject "*seem unfamiliar*" (Suvin 1979, 6). In Levin's novel, the subject is easily recognised by the contemporary reader, but at the same time it was unfamiliarised with the unrealistic image of a robotic woman depiction in a non-existent but realistic setting.

By referring to the points raised by Suvin, Sargisson states, "Distanced, remote, and strange, utopias variously interrogate the now from an imaginary good-place, and estrangement permits this interrogation" (2007, 393). Sargisson also claims there is a problematic side of this estrangement since it "takes us into dark places, and people who try to realise utopian dreams in intentional communities often find the various effects of estrangement impossible to endure" (2007, 393). For the Stepford suburbs, the classification of the place as "distanced, remote, and strange" (in Sargisson's terms) does not sufficiently define the settlement; however, still two of the descriptive features are applicable. "Distanced" describes these suburbs as the life here is isolated, not in the meaning of living on an island type of isolation, but the houses, women, atmosphere, life, neighbourhood here are all different from the other suburbs. Moreover, although not physically distanced in a measurable way, the modified lives of the residents are distanced since there is no external governmental, judicial, or legislative power in this community, but only their internal systematic order. The other description, "strange," also defines the life in Stepford because it is unusual and impossible to have such an impeccable and perfect place, or such beautiful super-housewives who are not interested in anything but their homes. To illustrate, while Joanna and Bobbie were looking for women to gather, the impossibility of finding any women who is willing to do anything but the housework was shocking for them, and Bobbie called Stepford as "the Town That Time Forgot!" (Levin 2000, 36). Bobbie's description of the town gives an idea about how distanced, strange, and enclosed Stepford is. Bobbie is the one who called the town "Zombieville," and she asked Joanna "Is that your idea of the ideal community?" when she is telling how women in Norwood, which is a very close town, are "rushed and sloppy and irritated and alive" (Levin 2000, 87). The intriguing but distressing thing here is that Stepford is physically surrounded by comparatively normal towns, there is no imprisoning system or physically forceful entrapment; on the contrary, the residents move to Stepford voluntarily and willingly. Stepford is a community neither distanced nor closed, neither isolated nor integrated. That is why women could not immediately recognise their captivity in this devouring and fatal system. The women in this town are almost aware but at the same time unaware of the situation since they realise the absurdity or weirdness at one point; however, they cannot recognise or identify what it is, and even after some point, they are forced to not recognise the real face of this community by being modified. Rhee underlines a similar point by stating, "As the novel highlights, simplifying a world requires simplifying those who inhabit that world. Living women, in their complexity, independence, and apperception of time and history, threaten the existence of Stepford's closed world, a space outside of time, history, and change" (2018, 76). The threatening female figures, therefore, are pacified robotically to sustain the intended enclosure in this community.

In the rest of her explanation on utopias, Sargisson reveals how utopias question the present time from an "*imaginary good-place*" by using "*estrangement*" as a method. The neighbourhood in *The Stepford Wives* could be depicted as an "*imaginary good-place*" because the established life here is ideal for the husbands, and from the patriarchal perspective, it is regarded as a "*good-place."* The men are satisfied and pleasant with their domestic, obedient,

always incredibly beautiful, and overjoyed wives. As Rhee pointed out, "*In Stepford, the robot housewives are programmed to only be concerned with performing domestic labor and satisfying their husbands sexually, unlike the living, thinking, desiring women like Joanna who are killed and replaced by these robot doubles*" (2018, 76). The husband-oriented wives who show no sign of exhaustion, who have no interest or hobby apart from staying at home and doing the housework, who are doll-like figures, and additionally the unrealistic and euphoric atmosphere at homes in Stepford create the factor of "*estrangement*" here. Levin questions 1960s and 1970s by drawing a satiric picture of an over-patriarchal system in which women are not oppressed by men but totally modified by them. Chermaine, one of the Stepford wives, talks to Joanna and says that "*Ed's pretty wonderful guy, and I've been lazy and selfish. I'm through playing tennis, and I'm through reading those astrology books. From now on I'm going to do right by Ed, and by Merrill too. I'm lucky to have such a wonderful husband and son*" (Levin 2000, 80). The commitment of women to their domestic duties and pleasure of their husbands appears to be a result of their internalised domestic bliss. The thoughts of the subservient and domestic wives or their self-perception show what kind of women men in Stepford want, what kind of life they want, and what kind of perspective they have ascribed to gender roles. When Joanna visits Carol to talk about founding a woman club or anything like this, Carol says that she has no time because she is too busy with the housework. Her reply exactly represents the mentality of the husbands in Stepford as she explains, "*Ted's better equipped for that sort of thing than I am, […]. And men need a place where they can relax and have a drink or two*" and women do not (Levin 2000, 32). Her explanation indicates the imposed gender difference and also the roles in the husband-wife relationship: the woman is inferior whereas man is superior in this relationship. Hence, the Stepford suburb is the enclosed area where commitment (as Kanter emphasised) and shared values (as Sargent emphasised) occupy the established community. The commitment here is seemingly based on the choice of women, but it is a kind of enforced commitment since women are unaware of this so-called choice. This enforcement related to commitment covers also the notion of shared values, but these shared values are just shared by men and robotised women rather than real and living men and women.

Although Stepford suburb is interpreted as a community where women are robotised as domestic figures to satisfy the needs of their husbands, it is possible to construe this closed community as a place where women are facilitated to be seen by being made unseen. Analyses and discussions on intentional communities are a part of utopian studies, or at least can be studied as a part of utopian studies. By referring to Bammer, Burwell or her own former studies, Sargisson states "*feminist analyses suggest that utopias offer women a particularly appropriate space in which to explore and develop desires for a better world*" (2007, 396). These depictions provide an opportunity for women to be seen, heard or at least to exist. She continues;

> *In these accounts, something about women's exclusion, silence, and lack of positive value in patriarchal systems of representation resonates with the utopian method, and the normative and conceptual distance of utopias makes them good-places in which to explore dreams. In all of these various discussions within the field of utopian studies, estrangement has a broadly positive and definitely important role. It permits critical distance, reflection, and new perspectives. It facilitates the articulation of repressed or marginal voices. And it works by creating distant spaces whence to interrogate the now* (2007, 396).

This distant space and distant reality designated in the novel strengthen the impact of

estrangement by creating a kind of distance to promote new perspectives on the women readers in 1970s. Sargisson's point on the correlation between silenced women in the patriarchal structures and the articulation of the repressed voices in utopias is possible to be illustrated with some characters from the novel. The Welcome Wagon lady who writes about the newly arrived women in *Stepford Chronicles* or Miss Austrian who is the librarian and responsible for the archived issues of the paper are the ones "*providing a record of Stepford in historical time*" (Rhee 2018, 84) in contrast to the vaporised women by being robotized. This historical record of the women's history in such a closed community is also the place where Joanna finds out Betty Friedan's visit to Stepford which was hosted by Women's Club. "*This article introduces historical time into the closed world, as Joanna begins to get a sense of Stepford's history and its stark difference from the present*" (Rhee 2018, 84). Like the article Joanna finds about the historical record of women in this community, Levin's book has the same role in terms of recording an estranged world to project the problems women faced then. In the Afterword of the novel, Peter Straub touches the timing of the novel as follows:

> *In 1972, the year The Stepford Wives was published, Betty Friedan helped found the National Women's Political Caucus, and The Feminine Mystique had been in print for nine years. That same year, Congress passed the (ultimately doomed) Equal Rights Amendment. To conservative-minded males, the feminist movement had just become something a great deal more than a minor nuisance* (2000, 195).

The historical timing of the novel is not only to be analysed scholarly, but it is also emphasised by the characters in the novel. To exemplify, Bobbie refers to Betty Friedan while she is criticising the Stepford wives as she says, "*It can't be a coincidence that Stepford women are all the way they are. And some of the ones we spoke to must have belonged to that club. A few years ago they were applauding Betty Friedan, and look at them now. They've changed too*" (Levin 2000, 85). The continuous reference to Betty Friedan in the novel is based on the prominent text *The Feminine Mystique* initially published in 1963, in which Friedan questioned the role of women and problematised the idealisation of daily chores of cooking and cleaning, of "*taking care of the physical needs of husband and children*" (1979, 59). Friedan's study on the analysis of traditional understanding of the ideal feminine and her critical analysis by suggesting a new type of femininity is referred in Levin's book to exhibit how liberal women could not be understood correctly especially by men. Friedan states, "*fulfilment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949-the housewife-mother*," and she adds, "*her solo fight to find her own identity was forgotten in the rush for the security of togetherness. Her limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home*" (1979, 38). However, she opposes these attributed roles to women in the 1950s and 60s, as follows: "*The feminine mystique says the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity*" (Friedan 1979, 37). Hence, the recurrent reference by the female characters in Stepford suburb epitomizes how neither men nor women were prepared for the new type of femininity and for the shift from commitment to family to the commitment of women themselves.

Through the novel, Joanna is supposed to be the main character, the one who is expected to be the rebellious woman representative of the feminist movement, and who is expected to find a way to change this system in Stepford; however, in the end of the novel, it is recognised that Joanna just became one of these Stepford wives, just an object in the story rather than being the subject of it. Williams clarifies the main purpose of the author here as the "*story encodes feminist arguments about the subjection of women in contemporary American patriarchy*" since

it was a very recent subject to be dealt with in terms of the second wave feminism. Williams adds, *"it also satirizes the emerging male backlash against feminists and feminism, expressing masculine nostalgia for the good old days when men were men and women were what men decreed they should be*" (2007, 87). The so-called "*masculine nostalgia*" is portrayed by means of the fraternity concept in the association, the masculine feeling of being responsible for the order (regardless of its being destructive for the women), and by means of the integration of mechanically and robotically transformed submissive women in *The Stepford Wives*. Joanna and Bobbie have a joke on the newspaper in the town and they say that the title of *the Stepford Chronicle* should change into *Chronic Ill* which "*indicates that in Stepford the passage of time does not produce significant change or generate new events worthy of being recorded; rather, time for the women of Stepford seems to be a marker of an unhealthy inability to change, a version of the town's uncanny uniformity that possesses a decidedly temporal character*" (Elliott 2008, 41). This "*unhealthy inability to change*" could also be seen in the transformation of both Joanna and Bobbie who had the observant critical eye in the beginning, but they could not even create a slight change with this awareness. They themselves become a part of this ill society.

To turn back to the argument of Sargisson on the intentional communities, she defines them as "*strange places, full of dreams, hopes, and disappointments as groups of individuals work collectively to realise a better life*," and she states that "*in order to pursue their vision of the good life, these groups require space (in which to experiment), individual security, and group coherence*" (2007, 396). When the neighbourhood in Levin's *The Stepford Wives* is considered, the hopes and dreams of husbands, the commitment of wives, their collective work to "*realise a better life*" (although women do not consciously and willingly do that) make the Stepford community an intentional community. In an intentional community, distance and physical separation from the local community are crucial requirements for the members "*to concentrate on their self-appointed task while insulated from external interruption, interference, and criticism*" (Sargisson 2007, 397). Here, in the novel, the husbands do not need to completely insulate their neighbourhood from the external interruption because they succeed in imposing the "*self-appointed task*" to their wives in another way. The novel leaves this point unexplained and unclear. How the wives change, how they turn to become a robot-like figure, an automaton, how they become a perfect housewife is unclear and left to the imagination of the reader.

Robotic transformation of women into submissive wives in the novel create a posthuman image by means of a startling discovery of technology which assigns an end to the woman kind. Hence, Levin uses the almost posthuman depiction to create an estranged image of woman to demonstrate a familiar problem in an unfamiliar manner. While relating estrangement concept to utopias, Sargisson claims that "*at a most fundamental level, utopias require a certain estrangement in order to function"* (2007, 394). She expands her statement as follows:

> *Sometimes, then, an intentional community represents a space which offers people the security to pursue their utopian vision and explore utopian practices. It is also a space whence the group acts collectively and reaches outwards to impact the wider community. And sometimes it is a space into which the group needs to retreat – to negotiate conflict and challenges that threaten their community's survival. All of this process requires some level of spatial estrangement. This estrangement permits intentional communities to pursue a normative agenda, generate a collective identity and cohesive group, nurture a shared vision, and*

> *follow a path to the good life. However, it also creates problems* (2007, 400-401).

The so-called "*estrangement*" in utopias is not exactly seen in Levin's novel as it is meant to be in its theoretical essence. However, the impossibility of such a sudden change in each woman from a normal and ambitious human being to an over-enthusiastic housewife is the estranging point. There is no distancing effect related to time or space but there is one related to the concept of a superhuman being. Since Sargisson refers to Suvin while using this concept of estrangement which originally goes back to Shklovsky, the original meaning or practice of this term facilitates the interpretation of the novel from the defamiliarization perspective. Victor Shklovsky is a Russian formalist who used defamiliarization, or estrangement to reveal "*an apparently ordinary state of affairs as extraordinary, producing wonder or horror at some circumstance which has been hidden in plain view*" (Coovadia 2020, 99). Considering this definition, what Levin does in this novel is showing a very familiar situation related to the gender role attribution, especially the expected domestic reality behind the supposedly and assumedly critical female thinkers and individuals. The reader, especially the second wave feminist reader would most probably ask questions and have a counter argument against the robotic image of dehumanised female body in this novel. The satirical perspective of Levin turns the utopic vision of the husbands of Stepford to the dystopic reality of the wives. Williams elucidates this issue as follows:

> *The Stepford men's project acts out one of the most ancient and perhaps most fundamental of misogynistic fantasises: that women are nothing but body. In this view, the dimension we call 'soul' or 'self' or 'identity' or 'personality' is quite satisfactorily reduced to a collection of recorded words permitting rudimentary communication with a body that cooks the meals, washes the dishes and cares for the children. Furthermore, 'she' is also always available and eager for sex* (2007, 89).

Hence, the Stepford wife is an image which (rather than who) physically exists as technically programmed female automaton. Being a housewife is already a challenging and difficult task even as a concept. Simone de Beauvoir elaborates on repetition; the endless circle of the house chores as follows:

> *Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean become soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. […] The battle against dust and dirt is never won* (1968, 470).

Beauvoir resembles the housework to the Sisyphus myth because of its "endless repetition," and all the domestic works such as washing, cleaning, ironing, and sweeping are also a "*denial of life*" by providing occupation for the housewives, and this denial of the outer life apart from the inner life of the house causes the divergence of the women from themselves (1968, 425). The life Beauvoir depicts is like a vicious circle, and the actual life she criticises here turns to become a fictional life for Stepford wives. In addition, the general social portrayal of a woman from the 1920s to the 1960s was a good mother and a housewife, and this was not only the public perception but also emphasised in the magazines and advertisements in the 1950s to create collective consciousness against the working woman, especially working mothers and wives (Banks 1993, 79). The Stepford-like women were pictured in the advertisements,

especially in the post-war era. The image of the "*happy housewife*" while cooking in the kitchen or while cleaning the bathroom, always smiling was "*intended to persuade women [that] life spent at home was rewarding*" (Turner 2003, 107). However, this struggle for the role imposition to women as the ideal mother and wife was fought against by women after the 1960s with the help of feminist movements, which are also emphasised in the novel.

An appealing and at the same time appalling part of the novel is that the women are transformed into automatons, and in this process, the main transformation is their loss of the capability of having a baby which is not actually the definition of the ideal woman concept in general. Williams accentuates this; "*Though patriarchy has sometimes diminished women by declaring that their bodies (and hence they) are essentially, baby-producing machines, the Stepford robots seem to have children before they are replaced*" (2007, 90). In other words, the women as stated in the title of the book are reformed, rearranged, recoded, and reattributed solely as the "*Stepford wives*," nothing else. Is this a partial solution to the problematised situation of the ideal wife and mother concept dealt with in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, or is this a portrayal of a newly emerged problem where women are depicted as just the ideal wives rather than a mother or solely a woman? The mother and housewife roles attributed to women after the 1950s were not thought to be sufficient to please men and husbands, so another factor was added: beauty. The twentieth century was a time of the appreciation of beauty and the physical appearance of women. A flawless beauty and perfection were necessary for an excellent woman. Naomi Wolf calls this the "*beauty myth*" (1991, 9). The concept of beauty is depicted in the form of idealised image of the perfect feminine body and a whole group of women in a specific geographical area were designed to perform this image. Das emphasises the relation between the social and individual body in Levin's novels as "*the modelling of the individual body corresponds to the modelling of the social body*" (1988 n.p.). The social body in the novel is the creation of a Stepford intentional community where the feminine and masculine roles are designed in the hands of men, and the individual bodies are designed accordingly which destroyed the concept of individual body concept in the novel.

Parkin expounds the general frame of the novel by stating that it is already well-known what the novel is about, it is supposed to be about "*traditional American community, frilly aprons, nicely waxed floors, scarily upbeat housewives, something about baking […]. Stepford is an icon of modern culture. It stands for the fifties and high heels and restrictive underwear and immaculate hairdos and a weird fixation with baked goods*" (2011 n.p.). However, she expands her view in the rest of her article by emphasising that the novel is not about the 1950s or it is not about the domestic mentality of women, but it is about 1970s and also it is "*about an active political feminist*" as well as her feminist husband. Parkin also adds: "*This is a novel about the bone-deep and irrational hatred of newly-liberated women, by men with power"* (2011 n.p.). Although the novel seems to be about women, it clearly demonstrates the condition of men in those years and shows the male gaze to the role of women in the society by using exaggeration and satire. Although the critics always focus on the unrealistically subservient and beautiful housewives who are highly pleased and satisfied with their new roles, the other side is also crucial. The husbands occupy the core of this new social system, this new intentional community (as claimed in this study). The appearance of all men in Stepford is pictured as helpful, liberal, tolerant, mild, and kind husbands. On the contrary, there is a hidden truth behind this entire perfect husband picture. They have secret plans on changing their wives; therefore, there is no necessity to struggle for anything or to act against anything. "*Masculinity defines and contains her within its prison of 'the feminine,' a process almost invariably violent. The Stepford husbands are basically high-tech Bluebeards*" (Williams 2007, 88). Apart from

the husbands who changed their wives into submissive and perfect robots, there is another striking character who approves (although unconsciously) the idea of having such a perfect woman in the house, and this person is Bobbie's son, Jonny. When Joanna asks Jonny about the change of his mother, he says, "*She doesn't shout any more, she makes hot breakfasts. […] I hope it lasts"* and continues by saying *"but I bet it doesn't*" (Levin 2000, 137). Regardless of carrying the role of being husband or son, all male figures want submissive, domestic, perfect, ideal women in their lives regardless of the woman's feelings, hobbies, life, choice, feelings.

Throughout the book, Joanna continually mentions the change in women and how she is afraid of changing like the other women. This continual emphasis on change "*suggests that the Men's Association has created a kind of evil inversion of the feminist consciousness-raising process, which turns women back into the brainwashed fembots they were before women's lib*" (Elliott 2008, 41). The idea of change is continuously referred to in the novel from the beginning to the end, but the target of this change shifts as well. In the beginning of the novel, after Joanna and Walter moved to Stepford, the first dialogue of these two foreshadows the upcoming problematic events. Walter decides to join the Men's Association which they both actually used to call "*outdated*," "*old-fashioned*" and which they are both against. Walter says that "*the only way to change it is from inside*;" however, there will be no effort of his to change this men-only association. Walter's promise to change the Men's Association and to make it "*Everybody's Association*" with "*co-ed poker*" by being a part of it does not sound very promising. Joanna's reaction is also representative of what the women were doing for their rights, she says that "*organizations can be changed from the outside, […]. You get up petitions, you picket –"* (Levin 2000, 11). To persuade her, Walter demands for only six months from her with a promise to change it from inside; however, this six-month period is explained in the rest of the novel as the necessary time to change the women to the happily subservient housewives. Tragically, the initial aim to change the so-called "*old-fashioned*" Men's Association turns to be a change of the new wave liberal and feminist women to old-fashioned and domestic wives.

In the first pages of the novel, Joanna's attitude or way of thinking clearly expresses her stand in terms of the gender roles since she wants to prove herself that she is not one of those women who do the housework while the husband is somewhere out there. This is a clear depiction of the stereotypes related to the man and woman in the family and related to their social roles. Joanna emphasises the equal positions of her and her husband as she determines not to do anything unless he does the same thing, as exemplified in the following part:

> *As a matter of principle she wasn't going to do any housework. Not that there wasn't plenty to do, God knows, and some that she actually wanted to do, like getting the living-room bookshelves squared away – but tonight, no sir. It could darn well wait. She wasn't Carol Van Sant and she wasn't Mary Ann Stavros – pushing a vacuum cleaner past a downstairs window when she went to lower Pete's shade.*
> *No sir. Walter was at the Men's Association, fine; he had to go there to join, and he'd have to go there once or twice a week to get it changed. But she wasn't going to do housework while he was there (at least not this first time) any more than he was going to do it when she was out somewhere – which she was going to be on the next clear moonlit night: down in the Center getting some time exposures of those Colonial shopfronts* (Levin 2000, 20-21).

As seen in the above excerpt from the novel, the initially portrayed woman is a free, critical,

independent, questioning, liberal, egalitarian woman who also rejects any imposed gender role to any gender regardless of male or female. Even when she wants to organise some shelves or do some house chores, Joanna rejects this desire since she is aware how it would easily turn to become an expectation for her being an "*angel in the house*". Joanna is also a curious, questioning character in the beginning since she wants to learn about the former Women's Club by asking Kit. The scene where she asks is also the scene where she realizes the absurdity and abnormality on the women here. She was watching her folding the T-shirt and smiling, and she thought:

> *Like an actress in a commercial.*
> *That's what they all were, all the Stepford Wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real* (Levin 2000, 65).

Joanna's thoughts on the resemblance of the Stepford wives to the actresses in the commercials is a kind of reference to the real commercials or advertisements in 1950s' and 1960s' America. In the 1950s advertisements, the products were about the domestic works as presenting woman as a happy housewife. Women in these advertisements generally were pictured in the warmth of a family, a man and happy children with laughter portrayed in a comfortable house equipped with kitchen appliances. Similarly, in the novel, Joanna asked Kit whether she is happy and whether she is "living a full life" or not to which she got the answer 'yes' as follows: "*I feel I'm living a full life. Herb's work is important, and he couldn't do it nearly as well if not for me. We're a unit, and between us we're raising a family, and doing optical research, and running a clean comfortable household, and doing community work*" (Levin 2000, 65). This reply reveals how the wives here are brainwashed with the idea that both men have their own duties to have a communal welfare (wilfully or not).

Towards the end of the novel, when Joanna and Bobbie are talking, Bobbie takes the knife in her hand to prove that she is a human being, and at that moment, Joanna's observation envisages the posthuman or robotic nature of the women in the scene: "*Joanna went forward, toward Bobbie standing by the sink with the knife in her hand, so real-looking – skin, eyes, hair, hands, rising-falling, aproned bosom – that she couldn't be a robot, she simply couldn't be, and that was all there was to it*" (Levin 2000, 176). Following that moment, the last chapter presents the transformed figure of Joanna as she is talking to Ruthanne and saying, "*Housework's enough for me. I used to feel I had to have other interests, but I'm more at ease with myself now. I'm much happier too, and so is my family. That's what counts, isn't it?*" (Levin 2000, 184). The final scene of the novel also captures a significant social reality and gives a paradoxical picture regarding the whole story. First of all, throughout the novel, the story is all about white middle-class families that actually occupy the core of the arguments against the second wave feminism, but Levin's addition of a black couple indicates the change in the society. Secondly, the paradox in the final scene summarises the whole satirical perspective of the novel. Ruthanne asks her husband's help for the children, she asks him to take the children to a place for supper when she is working on her book, and his answer is "*all right*" which gives a bright, liberal family picture that gives importance to equal household sharing. However, Ruthanne continues, "*I want to get it done with […]. Otherwise I won't enjoy next weekend*" (Levin 2000, 186). Here, all the liberal atmosphere of the dialogue is disturbed with the bitter reality that Ruthanne will be changed into an automaton by her husband. Elliott defines this scene as "*suffused with dramatic irony*," and

comments on it as follows: *"[…] blithely believing that her husband prefers a liberated wife, Ruthanne appears in our final glimpse of her as both unsuspecting and endangered, much like the classic horror-movie heroine directly before she is attacked by a monster only viewers know is there*" (2008, 53). Levin raises a question with picturing a community which was the mainstream communal structure beforehand but changed in 1960s; however, this idealised fictional community in terms of the masculine and feminine roles is one which is established in a mainly revolutionised society. By means of the exaggerated representation of robotised female characters, Levin raises an argument on absurdity of the idealization of domestic femininity, and reminds the "*feminine mystique*" in this estranged atmosphere.

Conclusion

Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* presents a very familiar, well-known subject in an almost unfamiliar science-fiction atmosphere where Levin creates mystically robotised housewives to satisfy the absurdly masculine and patriarchal demands of the men in the story. Although the story is classified as horror or comedy because of its movie adaptations, the problematised issue in the novel is disturbing and awakening rather than being scary or funny. As clarified in this paper, estrangement, distancing, and defamiliarization via the dehumanised body of the robotic wives in the closed community of Stepford are used to give a sarcastic picture of the real situation in terms of women liberation. As called "*Zombieville*" in the novel, Stepford suburb is a kind of village where there is no human being regardless of male or female since the women have no individual existence emotionally, psychologically, or cognitively; on the other hand, men are also zombie-like since they have lost their humanity and empathy to such a point that they terminated their own wives whom they willingly married. Considering the setting of Stepford as a village where no one is real or no one is actually living makes it an intentional community which presents an alternative setting for the reader by means of estrangement to make him/her look at the actual setting from a critical perspective.

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