

## A Heteropian Novel: Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Reyhan Özer Tanıyan  
Pamukkale University

**ÖZET** Margaret Atwood, *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*'nde<sup>1</sup> baskının hem totaliter (bütüncül) hem de baskıya direnen doğasını betimlemek için belirgin postmodern stratejiler kullanmıştır. Atwood'un eseri kadınların kendi kişisel bilinçleri için uyandığı, ataerkil sosyal düzen ile başa çıkmaya çalıştığı ve kendi aralarındaki ilişkileri biçimlendirdiği hayali bir ülkeyi ele almaktadır. Diğer bir deyişle, Atwood kendi ütopyasını göz önüne sermiştir. Bu, feminist bir söylem olarak, onun (kadının)-topyasıdır. Bir bakıma, Atwood'un kitabında kurduğu düzen, Foucault'nun tanımladığı gibi, uzamı ilişkisel, heterojen ve ucu açık olarak yeniden kavramsallaştıran bir heterotopyadır.<sup>2</sup> Ütopya ve distopya (karşı utopia) ile kıyaslandığında, heterotopik romanlar göz ardı edilmiş konuları veya mükemmel bir şekilde düzenlenmiş bir toplumun hicivsel tersten okunmasını işlerler. Kadınların bakış açılarından tarif edilen feminist heterotopik metinler, kadınlar için ideal olan ve ayrıca sınıflandırılmış, ırkçı ve kültürel ötekiye yer vermeyen toplumlara çağrıştırmaktadırlar. Bu yazınlar, "ütopya ve distopyayı...farklı iki kutuptan ziyade etkileşimli yarım küreler olarak birleştirerek ve melezleştirerek"<sup>4</sup> okuyucularını beslemektedirler. Bu da, Mohr'a göre, bu yazınların "sınırları aşmış, yeni boşlukları ve karşılıklı ilişkileri olan alternatif bir dünya" yaratmak için "ütopya ve distopyanın kurulu olan çift mantığını" eleştirdiği, baltaladığı ve sınırlarını bozduğu anlamına gelmektedir.<sup>5</sup> *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*'nde, heterotopik roman biçiminde, Atwood birbirleriyle zıtlık içerisinde olan cinsiyetçi bakış açılarını ve yaklaşımlarını tek bir çatı altına toplayabilmek için ütopya ve distopya arasındaki farklılığı çözümlenmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı da *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* adlı romanı heterotopik bir roman olarak incelemektir.

**ANAHTAR KELİMELELER** Heterotopik roman, *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*, Margaret Atwood, kadınlar

**ABSTRACT** Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* uses explicit postmodern strategies to characterize both the totalitarian nature of oppression as well as the resistance against it. Her writing deals with an imaginary land where women wake up to their self-consciousness, to struggle with the patriarchal social order, and to forge connections among themselves. In a way, Atwood envisions her utopia. This her-topia (a feminist discourse) is in fact a heterotopia which is the term used by Foucault to re-conceptualize space as relational, heterogeneous, and open-ended.<sup>3</sup> Compared with utopia and dystopia, heterotopian novels

1. Kitabın Türkçeye çevrilmiş olan başlığıdır. Çeviri 1992 yılında Afa Yayınlarından çevirmenler Sevinç Kabakçıoğlu/ Özcan Kabakçıoğlu tarafından piyasaya sürülmüştür.
2. Bu terim Mart 1967'de Michel Foucault tarafından verilen ("Des Espaces autres") "Of Other Spaces" başlıklı bir konferansta kullanılmıştır. İngilizce çevirisi *Diacritics* (Aksanlar) (Bahar, 1986) adlı kitabın Metinler/İçerikler Bölümünde yer almıştır. Foucault'ya göre, heterotopyalar "orta çağın hiyerarşik "yer topluluklarını" alt üst eden ve Galileo tarafından son derece gelişmiş "genişlemenin uzamı" ve ölçüsü olan erken modern döneme açılan "yerleşmenin uzamı"ni kapsayan modern dünyanın nitelikli uzamlarıdır. *Diacritics* ss.16-17.
3. ("Des Espaces autres") "Of Other Spaces", which a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. English translation appeared in the Texts/Contexts Section of *Diacritics* (Spring, 1986). According to Foucault, heterotopias are "the characteristic spaces of the modern world, superseding the hierarchic 'ensemble of places' of the Middle Ages and the enveloping 'space of emplacement opened up by Galileo into an early-modern, infinitely unfolding, 'space of extension' and measurement." *Diacritics*, pp.16-17.

explore issues neglected or satirical reversal of a perfectly regulated society. Depicted from the perspective of women, feminist heterotopian texts call for societies that are ideal for women and also not the classed, racial, and cultural other. They motivate their readers by “merging and hybridizing utopia and dystopia...as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles.”<sup>4</sup> That is to say, they “criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of classical utopia and dystopia” to create “an alternative world of transgressions, of new interstices and interrelations.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in the form of the heterotopian novel, Atwood dissolves the division between utopia and dystopia to incorporate conflicting gender perspectives and concerns and the main aim of this paper is to analyze *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a heterotopian novel.

**KEYWORDS** Heterotopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood, women

This paper reads Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a representative of heterotopian feminist writing (*écriture féminine*) that challenges the phallogocentric symbolic system and encapsulates various social interrelations and interactions in its fictional space, the space of heterotopia. Atwood produced her novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in the form of the heterotopian novel, which dissolves the division between utopia and dystopia as two literary sub-genres to incorporate conflicting gender perspectives, concerns, and claims. Corresponding to the two genders, she writes to challenge the existing patriarchal social system and to change the existing gender construction. Atwood’s writing is set in an imaginary land where women wake up to their self-consciousness, to struggle with the patriarchal social order, and to forge connections among themselves. In a way, Atwood envisions her utopia, which is as usually considered a feminist dystopia, as a heterotopia. The question that needs to be answered here is what heterotopia is and what differences it bears when compared to the term of utopia and dystopia.

Heterotopia is the term used by Foucault to reconceptualize space as relational, heterogeneous, and open-ended.<sup>6</sup> Like utopia, heterotopia is a place/space which has the property of being outside of the society which produced it, while at the same time carrying a relation to all the other remaining external spaces. A heterotopia suspects, neutralises or inverses the relations which it signifies, mirrors or reflects. The difference between utopia and heterotopia is that heterotopia possesses a material reality. If one says that the reflection in the mirror is a utopia, then the mirror as the object and as the medium is a heterotopia. Or, to be more precise; the mirror is a heterotopia when it reconstitutes the object standing or looking at itself being reflected. Foucault suggests some principles of heterotopia which can be easily matched with the novel of Atwood. First of all, in

4. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2005), p.50.

5. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p.50.

6. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”: *Texts/Contexts Section of Diacritics*, 16/1 (1986), pp.16-17.

heterotopias, there are “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live in a state of crisis,”<sup>7</sup> in this case the house of Commander, the area of Unwomen and the room of Commander are the best examples: “I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go.”<sup>8</sup> The second principle is that “a society, as its history unfolds can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion.”<sup>9</sup> As understood from the novel, the state of Gilead is a new version of America:

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children’s, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S.<sup>10</sup>

Ever since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get: sometimes they are there, sometimes not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida isn’t dependable, when there are roadblocks or when the train tracks have been blown up.<sup>11</sup>

The third one is that heterotopia “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible”<sup>12</sup> such as gardens and carpets because these have the capacity of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces, species that are incompatible with each other.

The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase and I go with it, one hand on the banister, once a tree, turned in another century, rubbed to a warm gloss. Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large rich family....<sup>13</sup>

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth one is that “heterotopias are often linked to slices in time”<sup>15</sup> such as museums and libraries: “The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town

7. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p.24.

8. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), p.120.

9. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p.25.

10. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.13.

11. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.35.

12. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p. 25.

13. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.18.

14. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.43.

15. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p.26.

constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children.”<sup>16</sup>

His laughter is nostalgic, I see now, the laughter of indulgence towards his former self. He gets up, crosses to the bookshelves, takes down a book from his trove; not the dictionary though. It’s an old book, a textbook it looks like, dog-eared and inky. Before showing it to me he thumbs through it, contemplative, reminiscent; ... the Venus de Milo, in a black-and-white photo, with a mustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her. On the opposite page is the Colosseum in Rome, labeled in English, and below, a conjugation: sum es est, su-mus estis sunt. ... written in the same ink as the hair on the Venus. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. “It’s sort of hard to explain why it’s funny unless you know Latin,” he says. “We used to write all kinds of things like that. ... Forgetful of me and of himself, he’s turning the pages.”<sup>17</sup>

The fifth principle deals with “the system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable”<sup>18</sup> like prisons or dormitories. In this case either one is forced as in the case of prison or one must submit to rites of purification, but in both one can only enter and exist by special permission.

Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top, No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, though to make it even as far as the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic alarm system, would be next to impossible.<sup>19</sup>

The last principle of heterotopias is that “they have function in relation to all space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles.”<sup>20</sup> Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, or else on the contrary their role is to create a space that is other, another real space as perfect or ill constructed. For this situation Foucault gives the examples of brothels and colonies. When applied to the novel, again the house of Commander, colonies of Unwomen and Jezebel’s bar can be the best examples.

However it is Tom Moylan who applies this Foucauldian term to a literary genre of “the postcapitalist, post-modern, and post-Enlightenment society,”<sup>21</sup> which not only

16. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.33.

17. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.168.

18. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p.246.

19. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.29.

20. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p.27.

21. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p.161.

persists in pursuing visions of better society after the bankruptcy of utopias and the disillusionment of dystopias but also begins to question, subvert, and dissolve the artificial distinction between utopia and dystopia as, discrete subgenres. Interweaving utopian and dystopian narrative strands, heterotopian novels re-envision ideal society as a heterogeneous space of diversity and dynamism. Heterotopian novels warn against any simplistic dichotomization and offer themselves as sites of conflict “where a wide range of discourses can be negotiated and tested against the backdrop of the strictly hierarchized closed-system model that usually informs our notion of the static uniformity of utopian or dystopian societies.”<sup>22</sup> In brief, heterotopian novels explore issues neglected or satirical reversal of a perfectly regulated society and this, in a way, overlaps with the perspective of women writers, especially those of feminists. So, there emerges another term named feminist heterotopia calling for societies that are ideal for women and also the classed, racial, and cultural other.

Feminist heterotopia takes women’s place in the ideal society as its central concern and focuses on everyday life, views and depicts from the perspective of women. They motivate their readers not in an either encouraging or appalling, but by “merging and hybridizing utopia and dystopia...as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles.”<sup>23</sup> They “criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of classical utopia and dystopia” to create “an alternative world of transgressions, of new interstices and interrelations.”<sup>24</sup>

In her book, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), Lucy Sargisson explicates transgression, which is regarded as one of the defining features of feminist heterotopias, as “the critique and displacement of meaning ‘constructed by a complex and hierarchical system of binary opposition’ and the suggestion of an alternative approach aimed at proclaiming difference and multiplicity.”<sup>25</sup> Following Sargisson, Dunja M. Mohr argues that transgression is the innovative potential of postmodern utopian/dystopian texts (that is, heterotopias), especially when such texts are feminist. She contends that in order “to refuse logic of sameness, dissolve hierarchized binary oppositions, and embrace difference, multiplicity, and diversity,”<sup>26</sup> it is necessary to start from the hierarchy of gender as the most fundamental binary opposition. It is the irruption of the ‘woman question’ into

---

22. Ralph Pordzik, *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p.5.

23. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p.50.

24. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p.3.

25. Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p.4.

26. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p.51.

utopian/dystopian literature that inserts dynamism into the static social hierarchies and the essentialistic polarization of good places and bad places.

In this light, given its portrayal of a heterotopian space, exploration of power struggles manifested in the form of control and transgression, as well as its feminist concerns, Atwood's novel, which has often been defined as a dystopia, is a typically heterotopian one. The fictional space of *The Handmaid's Tale* is heterogeneous and "an alternative world of transgressions, of new interstices and interrelations,"<sup>27</sup> because the narrative strands of dystopia and utopia merge and hybridize with each other whereas there is women struggle to re/constitute their female or, feminist selves. The Republic of Gilead is patriarchal, where there is an absolute control over the female body. In fact, absolute control over women, their bodies, and their procreativity is the foundation of this state, which implements patriarchal order towards the end of population increase.

In the case of Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called "traditional values," or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting. There was, too, a negative inducement: childless or infertile or older women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies, which were composed of portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic-cleanup squads, though if lucky you could be assigned to less hazardoustasks, such as cotton picking and fruit harvesting.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the nightmare of Gilead shadows every one's life especially that of women because it is women that are forced out of job and imprisoned at home, with their money frozen and transferred to male relatives. They are categorized into Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, Aunts, or Econowives, if they are lucky enough not to be labelled Unwomen and sent to the Colonies to die from cleaning nuclear wastes.

In this regard, another critic, J. Brooks Bouson comments that "through its imposition of a rigid system of hierarchical classification, the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogocentric economy."<sup>29</sup> However, much more is going on under this dystopian surface, in that within the iron-cage of Gileadian space, transgression and resistance are not only rampant but also, more importantly, intricately bound up with women's pursuit of their own writing, or, more specifically, tale-telling.

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I

27. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p.3.

28. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.274.

29. J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p.137.

have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head; as I go along, Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head. I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one.<sup>30</sup>

About this topic, in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa," H el ene Cixous stresses that "women must write themselves,"<sup>31</sup> that is, to put themselves, the unthinkable and unthought-of of the symbolic system of patriarchy and phallogentrism, into writing. Women have to tell their own stories, and, by doing so they constitute themselves, and create their own worlds. Under Cixous's influence and adding a spiritual dimension to  criture f eminine, in her book *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* Carol Christ claims:

Women live in a world where women's stories rarely have been told from their own perspectives. The stories celebrated in culture are told by men. Thus men have actively shaped their experiences of self and world, and their most profound stories orient them to what they perceive as the great powers of the universe. But since women have not told their own stories, they have not actively shaped their experiences of self and world nor named the great powers from their own perspectives.<sup>32</sup>

Although readers are only offered a limited view of the Gilead house from a Handmaid's perspective, spaces such as the locked box (with the *Bible* in it) and the Commander's study (an oasis of forbidden books and magazines) are male spaces forbidden to female access. It is significant that male space is related to the control of texts, while female space is reserved for bodies under control. The separation of male and female is at the same time the separation of text and body. That is why the spatial fusion of body and text is so subversive that the female hand will be cut off if it reaches for the male text: "But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare."<sup>33</sup>

In order to investigate how the novel attempts at generating a textual body or a bodily text against the Gilead principle of spatial segregation, it is necessary to start with tracing Offred's daily activity to observe the spatial structure of a Gilead house. Every

---

30. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.34.

31. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Florida: Florida State University Press, 1986), p.309.

32. Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p.10.

33. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.121.

morning after breakfast, Offred leaves her room and walks through the hallway, down the stairs, past the sitting room and dining room, into the kitchen, where she steps out through the back door and then the garden in the back of the house, to do her shopping in town. If the mere concern is her route within the house, with the exception of shopping, public prayer, or birth party at some other household, her activity is not only restricted to the house, but also the female part of the house: the interior, the domestic, and the back. Then, the female space is further divided, hierarchically, into several spaces.

During her daily walk, which covers a very limited distance and lasts for a very brief time, inside the Gilead house, there are at least three female spaces travelled by Offred: that of the Handmaid (her own room), of the Wife (the sitting room and dining room), and of the Marthas (the kitchen). Every woman has her own territory, or, to put it more bluntly, every woman is doomed to her prison cell. What's more, these constraining spaces are pushed onto the female body as a second skin, in the form of coloured uniforms. Wives can only dress in blue, Marthas green, Handmaids red, Aunts brown, Econowives patched-colour, while Unwomen gray. Not just women, in the male world, Commanders, Angels (soldiers) and Eyes (secret police) are strictly ranked and uniformed too. In this sense, within the boundary of Gilead which sticks to the essentialist notion of fixed and bounded place against the threat of cultural hybridization, the body, rather than being treated as a concrete and particular place, is reduced to a mere region, without identity, let alone individuality, in the hegemonic, absolute space of Gilead.

Overlapping utopian and dystopian sides of the feminine writing, Atwood creates a heterotopian perspective in *The Handmaid's Tale*, since it is not only a tale told by a Handmaid but also a tale of conflicting perspectives and voices, a confrontation of both men's and women's story. For this reason, there are two narrators in this novel, Offred the handmaid who records her tale on videotapes and a professor of Gileadian history who transcribes and edits her story. Therefore, in this way, even competing discourses are not represented as binary oppositions but an entwined and entangled network, with multiple trajectories overlapping, merging, and contesting with one another. On a much larger scale, Gilead as a country is a gigantic uniform that constrains and truncates the bodies of Gileadians. This is a country of grim walls, museum-like towns, and heavily guarded borders.

To conclude, in its thematic space, as a heterotopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* encapsulates various social positions as well as their interrelations and interactions. The ambiguity, undecidability, and complication in the thematic space are reflected in the formal space, which is a fragmented, mixed, and an open-ended process of textual diversion,

differentiation, and de/re-construction. To summarize with the words of Foucault, mirror is the novel as the heterotopia, the object standing or looking at it, the real object in the real space is U.S.A as a whole and the illusion reflected is Gileidian society and its imposed rules. So, Atwood in her heterotopian novel explores issues hitherto neglected in the whole-hearted celebration or satirical reversal of a perfectly regulated society, such as the position of the gendered or ethnic other in the non-existent bad place.

#### REFERENCES

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Books, 1996).
- Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).
- Christ, Carol. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Florida: Florida State University Press, 1986).
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces": *Texts/Contexts Section of Diacritics*, 16/1 (1986), pp.16-17.
- Mohr, Dunja M. *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2005).
- Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986).
- Pordzik, Ralph. *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).
- Sargisson, Lucy. *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).