

S(Heroes) and Subversive Subjectivity in Speculative Fiction The Eye of the Heron and The Testaments

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How to cite this article: Dr. Shimi Moni Doley (2024) S (Heroes) and Subversive Subjectivity in Speculative Fiction The Eye of the Heron and The Testaments. *Library Progress International*, 44(3) 28965-28971

Abstract:

Utopia implies the quest or desire for an idealized world and Utopian thinking and writing is the articulation of creative and critical ideas about existing society or a society of the future. But, the vision of an ideal world varies from people to people as there is so much variation in what people consider a perfect world. Sometimes, the quest to create a Utopia by some leads to the abrogation of rights of others which manifests into an irony of Utopian appearances but dystopic realities. The female-authored Utopia/Dystopia fiction has often been a way of articulating the unspeakable and of imagining a powerful female protagonist in opposition to the phallic law. This paper examines how Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Eye of the Heron* and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* employ the generic conventions of Utopian/Dystopian fiction to interrogate sexual and gender politics in society and provoke the readers to question and value their own freedoms. *The Eye of the Heron* published in 1978 represents Le Guin's anarcho-pacifist ideals and is set in a penal colony on the planet Victoria inhabited by the descendants of violent criminals exiled from earth and another group called People of the Peace, exiled following a massive nonviolent march from Moscow to Lisbon. A faceoff erupts between the two groups and Lev is the heroic ideal leading the people of the peace but ultimately, he is shot dead. It is Luz Marina Falco, the female protagonist and daughter of the leader of the rival faction who ultimately leads them to a new Eden, who had revolted against her father and her culture's treatment of her as an object for the service of a man. In the end, Luz Snatches freedom on her own terms. Atwood's *The Testaments* published four decades later and as a sequel to the *The Handmaid's Tale* attributes the authorial voice to a supposedly female oppressive figure – Aunt Lydia. Atwood blurs the distinction between stark villain and victim. Atwood gives this authorial figure a chance to prove and testify that she was not an amenable colluder but a subversive agent provocateur who while abetting the brutal patriarchy had also been secretly plotting Gilead's downfall. Lydia's story elliptically refers to her guilt but it also focuses on the suffering that coerced her into the oppressor's role and the subversion she wreaks on the patriarchal order as an insider.

Key Words: dystopia, gendered subjectivity, Shantih Town, subversive, totalitarian regime, surveillance

Subversive Gendered Subjectivity in Utopian/Dystopian Fiction *The Eye of the Heron* and *The Testaments*

The term 'Utopia' connoting an ideal state emerged in 1516 through the book *Utopia* written by Thomas More. Since then, speculative writings regarding this 'ideal' had been the exclusive preserve of the male writers till the 18th century. In 1836, the publication of *Three Hundred Years Hence* by Mary Griffith and *Mizora: A Prophecy* by Mary Bradley in 1881 in America introduced woman-centric utopias and marked the entry of women writers into this sub-genre of speculative fiction. Subsequently, the publication of *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1915 inspired a whole generation of women writers, writing feminist utopias, to contribute to pulp fiction magazines. Despite the prolific contribution of these women writers, the male editors and critics believed that 'women do not make good scientific writers, because their education and general tendencies in scientific matters are usually limited'. Hence, these writings were not considered worthy literary and ideological material. With the advent of the 1960s, a considerable number of women writers pursued careers in serious science fiction

writing. This was in part due to the renewed focus on science education brought forth by the new space explorations, and the launching into space of the first artificial man-made satellite *Sputnik* in 1957 by the former Soviet Union; another factor was the 1960s New Wave Women's Movement. This opened up the genre to greater stylistic experimentation, complex philosophical and scientific ruminations and more radical themes.

Luz Marina in Ursula Le Guin's *The Eye of the Heron*

Ursula Le Guin's *The Eye of the Heron*, written during the mid-1970s and published in 1978, articulates some of the feminist utopic concerns of the times and is a response to the deep-rooted embeddedness of gender prejudice in society. The story, at one level, can be interpreted as Luz Marina Falco's quest for physical and intellectual emancipation and her eventual extrication from the yoke of ignorance and male dominance through her own machinery. This quest not only leads to her freedom but also the freedom of certain members of the Shantih Town who wanted to venture out and establish a new settlement. The text contains a dialogic combination of both utopian and dystopian realities and is a neat delineation of the complexity of history or the narration of history. Luz chances upon the truth of the history of the Falco family and the residents of the City when she reads the front cover of the First Aid Medical Manual belonging to the family doctor which he had mistakenly left on the table. Among other words were a cluster of red-letter words which read as follows: 'DONATED BY THE WORLD RED CROSS FOR THE USE OF THE PENAL COLONY ON VICTORIA'. (Le Guin, p.121) With this new piece of information Luz seeks clarification from her father, 'Our ancestors were sent here as prisoners, is that right? That's what the Shanty-Towners in school said...They said the First Generation were all criminals. The Earth Government used Victoria for a jail. The Shanty-Towners said *they* were sent because they believed in peace or something, but *we* were sent because we were all thieves and murderers.' (Le Guin, p.125) Her father's response: What do they know? You let them tell you that Luis Firmin Falco, my great-grandfather, the founder of our house, was a thief, a jailbird. What do they know about it! I know, and I can tell you, what our ancestors were. They were men. Men too strong for earth. The Government on Earth sent them here because they were afraid of them... Well, when that was done, when the real men were gone, the Earth people were left so weak and womanish that they began to be afraid even of rabble like the Shanty-Towners. So they sent them here for us to keep in order. Which we have done. You see? That's how it was.'

(Le Guin, p.126)

An unveiling of alternate versions of history divulges the fact that the people residing in the planet Victoria are the recusants of Earth, the City dwellers from Brazil-America and the Shantih Towners from CanAmerica, exiled from their terrestrial homelands to another planet for being too violent (The City people) or too non-violent (the Shantih Towners). Le Guin puns throughout the *The Eye of the Heron* on the Sanskrit term *Shantih* which denotes peace that surpasses all understanding but for the men of the City, the Shantih Towners are just "Shanty Towners". The Shantih Towners took up farming for the whole community – the City dwellers as well as the Shantih Towners. In exchange the City had promised to provide them tools and ironworks manufactured by them and fish caught by the City fleet. But gradually the City reneged on its part of the bargain and the People of the Peace compromised and adjusted as they were not aware of the techniques of conflict and resistance. The City society was a masculinist capitalist sexist society whereby women's roles were confined to domesticity and child-breeding. Luz Marina, Boss Falco's daughter, chafes under the City's constricting regulations for women. Resenting her predetermined future and denial of choice, she ruminates, 'And what use was she, what was she good for? The continuation of the house of Falco, of course. And then what? Either Herman Marquez or Herman Macmilan. And nothing whatever she could do about it. She would be a wife. She would be a daughter-in-law. She would wear her hair in a bun, and scold the servants, and listen to the men carousing in the hall after supper, and have babies. One a year.' (Le Guin, p. 127) With the aid of Vera, a prisoner from Shantih Town kept at their villa, Luz comes to realize the paths to freedom in her own soul. The character of Luz is the fulcrum around which the utopic ideal rests and Le Guin vividly depicts this character's struggle against history and inheritance, fighting to create a kinder and gentler reality. She is given agency when she eavesdrops on her father and Herman Macmilan's plans to coerce the Shantih Towners into providing free labour to clear land meant for the establishment of new estates for the elites of the City. She feels outraged at the exploitative and unjust nature of their plan and decides to go to Shantih Town to warn the people there. Her decision to stand by the truth at all cost or at great personal loss indicates the utopic potential of her personality. Her journey to warn the people of Shantih Town, thus, becomes her first step towards both a physical and ideological quest of the utopic ideal. She meets

Lev there, a former classmate of hers, and conveys to him of the impending City raid. Lev is the young idealistic leader of the Shantih Towners and was among the eight explorers of the Town who located a new tract of land for a new settlement. In the meantime, Lev had rescued a contingent of his people who were pressed into forced labour by the City and his *modus operandi* was to lead his people off into the darkness and the fog when appeals to the camp commander for compassion for the sick and wounded failed. The commander of the soldiers, Captain Eden, was left with the ignominy of facing punishment and humiliation from the Bosses in the City on his return there for failing to control a group of “peasants”. Lev’s reflections on the significance of this victory articulates an idealistic vision of a harmonious future built on the brotherhood of humanity on Victoria:

They had won. It had worked. They had won their battle without violence. No deaths; one injury. The ‘slaves’ freed without making a threat or striking a blow; the Bosses running back to their Bosses to report failure, and begin to understand, to see the truth...the City would join the Town.. When their guards deserted them, the Bosses would give up their miserable playing at government, their pretence of power over other men. They too would come, more slowly than the working people, but even they would come to understand that to be free they must put their weapons and defences down and come outside, equal among equals, brothers’

(Le Guin, p. 180)

Le Guin bases the philosophical underpinnings of Lev’s and the people of Shantih Town’s resistance to the concept of Civil Disobedience and Non-violence propounded by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Inspired by his recent victory Lev organizes a protest strike by the Shantih Towners against the City in which 4000 people participate. Luz sees the vulnerabilities in the Pacifist-Anarchist ideology to counter the moral degradation of the masculinist-capitalist system of the City, as any dialogue with the city is likely to become a justification for the City to invoke further violent actions against the Shantih. Luz sees the futility of reasoning with the City and pushes for a new daring and pragmatic action i.e. leave for the new settlement without approval from the City and seek freedom on their own terms. It seemed a more viable option as there was less possibility of their being captured back by the City soldiers knowing that planet Victoria was a huge unfathomable and unexplored wilderness for the City dwellers. Lev disagrees and leads his people to deliver their demands to the City and is shot and killed, a violent death on a hillside in a storm of violence. A dozen others are trampled to death in the ensuing melee. Proving Luz’s reading of the situation as more realistic and functional, Le Guin presents a critique of not blindly adhering to a certain ideology that worked in a certain place and time but to make our Truths and Freedoms and not be beholden to systems built for other historical and societal contexts.

Luz Marina becomes more and more conscious of the need to seek new frontier which assumes the proportion of a quest for her. In her vision, Luz sees new possibilities for freedom and peace to be realized and exhorts the people of Shantih not to cease searching for newer lands and better prospects:

This is a whole continent, a whole world. Why do we have to stay here, huddled up here, destroying each other?...

..The world, the whole world is there for you to live in and be free, and that would be running away. From what? to what? Maybe we can’t be free, maybe people always take themselves with themselves, but at least you can try. What was your Long March for? What makes you think it ever ended?

(Le Guin, p. 231)

Just as Luz Marina had observed, the planet Victoria had many beautiful beginning places as the second expedition soon proved. They established their new settlement in a pleasant place abundant with bog-rice, abundant animals for trapping and a clear stream running by. Luz Marina selects the location for the new settlement ‘This is a new place, Andre. A beginning place.’(Le Guin, p. 248)... ‘I don’t know what I’m talking about. I want to stay here, Andre.’(Le Guin, p. 249) and Andre observes with tender humour, ‘Then I expect we will...Would we ever have started, I wonder if it hadn’t been for you?’(Le Guin, p. 249)

Partiarchal repression did not only inform Luz’s rational choices but also shaped the more unconscious elements of her gendered subjectivity. As a member of a subordinated group Luz had an alternative insight into the power relations that subordinated women in The City and the power relations that subordinated the inhabitants of Shantih Town *vis a vis* The City. For Luz, her position is that of the outsider-within in The City. The vantage point of her vision is that as a member of a subordinated group she has a better view of their location which the mainstream culture is unaware of. This vantage point confers on her the ability to erect effective oppositional strategies to destabilise the status quo. The subjugated viewpoint adopted by Luz leads to a sustained, objective and transforming account of her subjectivity. From the standpoint of a woman, a colonised person or a labourer –

if one intends to see critically from these positions –one can access knowledge that is quite extraordinary and potent than knowledge gained through the axes of domination. It requires one to make concerted effort to get below the surface reality and develop knowledge about the impact of underlying domination. Luz awakens to the realisation that society's most potent tool to make marriage and motherhood the ideal for women is through the socialisation process and, in the process, it turns them into dependent adults. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, stories true to the experiences of women, lived and otherwise, will emerge 'only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men' (*Writing a Woman's Life*, p.47). It was invigorating for the 1970s female readers to see Luz Marina as a 'liberated go-getter' character, one who sets new ground for aspirational female readers. Also, the setting, in a far-off distant planet named Victoria, makes it simultaneously fantastic and realistic. Ursula Le Guin interrogates gender and sexual politics through the blurring of the boundaries between the fantastic and the realistic.

Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Baby Nicole in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* recount events that happened 15 years after the story narrated in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the setting is the imaginary republic of Gilead which was formed from a part of the former United States of America after a military coup. It is a patriarchal theocracy with a strict hierarchical order. The military regime maintained that the coup was necessary to bring about reforms and 'heal' the country's demographic problem of widespread infertility and high infant mortality caused by toxic pollution and nuclear waste. They reasoned out that the problem can be solved by curbing individual freedom, free love, birth control and women's careers and erasing homosexuality. Further, in *The Testaments*, Commander Judd claims that the situation was aggravated by 'the selfish choices of women' and 'rules and boundaries promote stability and thus happiness' and, hence, the restrictions for a better society and better quality of life. Thus, the novel carries forward the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* as to how women's bodies are controlled, manipulated and dispossessed and, in the process, exposes the extreme failure of empathy and the loss of ethos of partnership and connectivity on the part of the male elite. In such discursive practices there is little bodily autonomy for women often referred to as 'men making decisions about women's bodies'. The dystopic quality here is that female bodies are appropriated for public use not only verbally and metaphorically but also politically and legally.

The narrative of *The Testaments* is presented through three narrative voices simultaneously – one is through the voice of Baby Nicole, who was stealthily taken out of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and is now 16 years old and living in Canada; the second voice is that of Agnes', who was taken away from her parents Offred and Luke and raised by the Gilead regime; and the third voice is that of Aunt Lydia, the ruthless enforcer of the new ideology in Gilead and the trainer of the handmaids in the Red Center. In a repressive patriarchal society like Gilead, where women were supposed to be illiterate, silent and passive, the testimonies of these three women offer a subversive narrative in opposition to the official narrative. Baby Nicole and Agnes know very little beyond the world they inhabit and their narratives reveal the lies peddled to them by adults; in Nicole's case, she had been given a new name Daisy in Canada to protect her from being abducted by the Gilead regime. Agnes, on the other hand, is fed an idealistic tale regarding her background in Gilead to comfort her and to encourage her to cooperate. But as they grow older, they begin interrogating the loopholes in the stories narrated to them. Later Agnes learns of more vile truths, lies and deceit underneath the utopic/dystopic Gilead society when she starts working in the Hildegard Library to make fair copies of Aunt Lydia's speeches. She finds confidential files containing misdeeds of the elites of Gileadian society being mysteriously placed on her work table. As she peruses through them, she is confronted with the ugly truths concerning the highly respected members of Gilead. This is how she comes across the truth of the murder of the former husband of her stepmother Paula, Commander Saunders. The gossip circulated by the Marthas was that there was "an unlawful and sinful liaison" between their Handmaid and Commander Saunders and the said Handmaid had killed Commander Saunders with a skewer as he had been making demands that drove her over the edge of sanity. Paula and her Martha discovered the corpse splattered in blood and with the pants down. It explained why Paula was covered in blood "while putting the dead Commander's trousers back on him to save appearances" (306). Flipping through the blue folder Agnes discovers that the truth was quite contrary to what the rumours stated:

It was augmented by photographs, and transcripts of many secretly recorded conversations. There had been no illicit liaison between Commander Saunders and his Handmaid – only the regular Ceremonies decreed by law. However, Paula and Commander Kyle – my erstwhile father – had been having an affair even before Tabitha, my

mother, had died.

Paula had befriended the Handmaid and offered to help her escape from Gilead since she knew how unhappy the girl was. ... after the Handmaid had set out, Paula had skewered Commander Saunders herself. That was why she had so much blood on her, not from putting his trousers back.

She'd bribed her Martha to back up the murderous Handmaid story, combining the bribe with threats. Then she'd called the Angels and accused the Handmaid, and the rest had followed.

... The Handmaid had been interrogated. (The transcript of the interrogation was attached, and it was not comfortable reading.)

... She was clearly innocent. But she was hanged anyway. (306)

Agnes concludes "Once a story you've regarded as true has turned false, you begin suspecting all stories"(307).

Atwood in *The Testaments* conveys the message that social polarisation would eventually make everyone vulnerable, including the elite and the privileged. An individual can stay untouched only upto a certain level. There is a reiteration of the fact that there would be unexpected turns in store in any political regime as Aunt Lydia's reminiscence of the beginning of Gilead in *The Testaments* reminds one of Offred's warning in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "In a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you know it" (66). Thus, while Gilead authorities claim that they are making the world 'a better place', as Commander Fred Waterford clarifies in the novel, 'Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some' (*Handmaid's Tale*, 366). In keeping with this philosophy, Agnes in *The Testaments* is brainwashed into believing that "the few must make sacrifices for the sake of the many"(101) for the future of Gilead and she felt that it wasn't fair. Agnes, through a child's impartial perspective, realises the truth about Gilead – that it does not have a future and it cannot have one. Paradoxically, Agnes observes that, in a world where women were deprived off the right to read and write, Aunt Lydia and her brood of Aunts were allowed this privilege which gave them access to enormous clout and power. The Aunts while governing the space meant for women, also, became a bridge between the womenfolk and the Commanders who governed Gilead. Thus, they had access to the dual spaces of the masculine and the feminine and wielded considerable power by being privy to the secrets of those in power. The aunts were in charge of the Archives, of recording the genealogies of the Elites, controlled the interaction between males and females and were part of the totalitarian surveillance system. The dividend was that they had access to secret crimes of the elites which gave them greater leverage over the ruling regime. Agnes comes to this shocking realisation while interned to become an Aunt:

This was what the Aunts did, I was learning. They recorded. They waited. They used their information to achieve goals known only to themselves. Their weapons were powerful but contaminating secrets, as the Marthas had always said. Secrets, lies, cunning, deceit – but the secrets, the lies, the cunning, and the deceit of others as well as their own.

If I remained at Ardua Hall – if I performed my Pearl Girls missionary work and returned as a full Aunt – this is what I would become. All of the secrets I had learned, and doubtless many more, would be mine, to use as I saw fit. (309)

In *The Testaments* Aunt Lydia appears to have a more complex character and possesses the power to trigger the disintegration of Gilead from within. Aunt Lydia's narration of her transformation from a fair, dignified and knowledgeable Judge into a Gilead collaborator through extreme physical torture in what the commanders called the 'Thank Tank' is not only a visceral depiction of oppression of women but also the indomitable resilience of a determined woman:

I was parked inside my twilight cell for an unknown length of time, but it couldn't really have been that long judging from the length of my fingernails when I was brought out of it. Time, however, is different when you're shut up in the dark alone. It's longer. Nor do you know when you're asleep and when awake.

.... One day, if it was a day, three men came into my cell without warning, shone a glaring light into my blinking purblind eyes, threw me onto the floor, and administered a precise kicking, and other attentions. The noises I emitted were familiar to me; I had heard them nearby. I won't go into any further details, except to say that tasers were also involved.

.... Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat*

in the meantime, but I will do it. (148-149)

This brutal coercion yielded her outward cooperation but never her inner consciousness which still remained independent of the indoctrination. When she wept, her ‘third eye’ kept thinking and planning revenge which she carried out by leaking confidential information to the Mayday resistance fighters against the Gilead regime. The recording of her story and the subterfuges she indulged in to bring about its downfall is an indictment of Gilead and her narrative is addressed to a reader of the future. The corporeal erasure of the female body leads to a backlash just as nature fights back at the Anthropocene centre, the suppressed forces in Gilead accumulates and become a form of resistance precisely through the agency of the body.

Thus, it is apt that it is through the agency of the body that resistance is illuminated in *The Testaments*. The eventuality of the downfall of Gilead is hinted at by Aunt Lydia when she tells Commander Jude: ‘Two and two do sometimes add up to four. And we women, myopic as we are, often notice the finer details that may escape the broader and loftier views of men’. (281)

The counter force to the oppressive patriarchal regime in *The Testaments* is Aunt Lydia and her disciple Agnes, who assumes the identity of Aunt Victoria. The female characters who provide resistance to the regime from within gains agency through control of the narrative and keeping their mind body intact, thus, overcoming the binary split.

Conclusion

The voice of Aunt Lydia’s confessional narrative, Agnes/Victoria’s discovery of the true stories behind the Gilead lies and Nicole’s body carrying a microdot with all evidence against the regime, and Becka/Aunt Immortelle sacrificing herself by hiding in the water cistern to let the two girls escape with the important message ensuring the fall of Gilead, planned by Aunt Lydia for a long time, demonstrates that supportive partnership on the one hand and the employment of the resources of the body and mind on the other can counter any form of totalitarianism.

Atwood blurs the distinction between stark villain and victim. Atwood gives Aunt Lydia a chance to prove and testify that she was not an amenable colluder but a subversive agent provocateur who while abetting the brutal patriarchs had also been secretly plotting Gilead’s downfall. Lydia’s story elliptically refers to her guilt but it also focuses on the suffering that coerced her into the oppressor’s role and the subversion she wreaks on the patriarchal order as an insider.

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