



**A glimpse of Hope: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale  
and Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower as Critical  
Dystopias**

**By**

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**Abstract:**

The dystopian fiction of the late twentieth century embodies the philosophical and cultural thought processes and practices of the late postmodern period. Postmodern dystopia differs from classical dystopia by leaving a space for the possibility of a better society. The imaginative exploration of better, rather than worse, place found a new form of what Tom Moylan identifies as a critical dystopia. This kind of dystopian novel frees the readers from the two-dimensional evaluative continuum of classical dystopian fiction. Moreover, critical dystopia revives traditional dystopia by extending hope to include an indefinite suggestion of a better world. This paper examines the utopian impulse in two critical dystopian novels; Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)



and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). Both novels construct alternative worlds where human beings suffer extreme hardship, but they have space for nurturing hope. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* represents the suffering of women in theocratic state. Throughout this dystopia, the protagonist finds a way to resist this situation. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* sets in 2024 when society suffers environmental degradation due to climate change. The protagonist creates a new religion that can help her to establish a utopian space for her people until she can travel to space to find another planet where she and her followers can start a new life. Both Atwood and Butler criticize society and deliver a powerful message that people can fight for freedom.

**Keywords:** Critical dystopia, postmodernism, Tom Moylan, utopian impulse, critique of capitalism



## A Glimpse of Hope: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as Critical Dystopias

Traditionally, dystopian fiction focuses on imagined societies' social, political, and economic problems. The tradition of dystopian fiction continues in the postmodern era but with a significant difference. The scope of this paper includes the dystopian fiction of the late twentieth century, known as a critical dystopia, as a way of resisting capitalist society. By definition, critical dystopia leaves a space of hope and opens a space of resistance that enables the protagonists of these novels to oppose the dystopic situation and hegemonic power. This paper deals with two critical dystopian novels: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. I attempt to examine the elements of critical dystopia in the two novels and how the two authors open space for their protagonists to resist the dystopic situation and leave their readers with a sense of hope at the end of both novels.

While nineteenth-century utopias attempted to raise awareness of social issues, the twentieth century has been marked by the production of dystopian literature. The late twentieth and twenty-first centuries' dystopian fiction embodies the late postmodern period's philosophical and cultural thought and practices. According to postmodernism, reality exists only through interpretation, and human experiences are relative rather than definite or universal. As postmodernism rejects the meta-narrative in general, it also questions the value of the science fiction genre and its sub-genre, utopia. Postmodern consciousness examines the significance of utopian literature because of its inclination towards totalitarianism and universal rules.

Utopian discourse embodies faith in human rationality, perfection, totality, and unity. Thus, the utopian novel constructs a human community where individual relationships are organized according to perfect principles. In this sense, utopia represents a perfect and static imagined place where change is undesirable. However, postmodern consciousness implies uncertainty and ambiguity, so postmodernism insists on the end of utopia. In other words, postmodernism challenges the project of constructing utopias because postmodern culture aims to deconstruct beliefs of eternal truth and universal reason. Postmodern critics refuse any attempt at the universal definition valid in any place and at any time. Ruth Levitas remarks, "Postmodernity is radically anti-foundationalist, so that at least those forms of utopianism which



entail claims about truth and morality are called into question" (15). The utopian image of the future is deemed to be totalitarian. However, there were other reasons for the utopian discourse's failure. Philosophers remark that utopia started to have a negative view after the end of the First World War. This negative view encourages writers to introduce a different form of literature.

After the Second World War, writers produce dystopian fiction instead of utopian. Dystopia is a special kind of utopia; it is the dark side of utopia. It insists on the logic of domination and oppression. Dystopian writers emphasize the loss of humanity within systematized control societies. Throughout the pessimistic dystopia, they contradict the optimistic view of utopia. In the early twentieth century, writers such as Gorge Orwell and Aldous Huxley produce dystopian novels to show the failure of the communist utopian experience in Europe. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini remark that the dystopian imagination has "served as a prophetic vehicle," for writers who has ethical and political concerns "for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside" (*Dark Horizons*, 2). Yet writers of traditional dystopia leave their readers perplexed because they only warn them about the future without giving them any hope for a better life in this future.

However, the dystopian fiction of postmodernism has a different context, in which consumerist culture, late capitalism, and globalization represent the new forms of oppression across the world. In the 1980s, a new kind of dystopian fiction appears. It includes all the stylistic devices of postmodernism and science fiction. This new dystopian fiction positions itself in a critique of late capitalism. It also engages in contemporary culture, especially the consumerist economy. According To Peter Stillman, dystopian writing in the late 1960s and 1970s responded to certain developments in utopian and dystopian writing. As Tom Moylan, he calls this development a "critical utopia" ("Dystopian Vision" 366). Critical utopia offers some utopian potential but is also a reaction to the limitation of utopian tradition.

Moylan remarks that utopian writing is transformed into a critical utopia. He points out that utopia turns out to be critical; "Critical in the Enlightenment sense of *critique* – that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation" (*Demand* 10). He states



that critical utopia rejects utopia as a blueprint because of its limitation but also preserves it as dream. Critical utopian writers are aware of the limitation of utopian tradition. Moylan states that critical utopian novels "focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternative" (*Demand* 10). These novels attempt to find hope in contemporary sociopolitical disappointment.

Authors of critical utopia are aware of the limitation of utopian traditions. However, they use utopian impulses to create a better and open future. For them, critical utopia is a kind of challenging the capitalist ideology. Moylan states that "since the 1960 especially, the utopian impulse had played an important role in the politics and culture of the many movements opposed to society as it is structured by the modern phallogocratic capitalist system and the bureaucratic state" (*Demand* 15). In this sense, critical utopia resists the closure of ideology. But, at the end of 1980, some critics believe that this utopian impulse ceases to be a catalyst of change. Ruth Levitas remarks that in critical utopias, "Holding up a critical mirror to the present to expose its negative characteristics and effects is also important, and indeed a necessary precursor to developing and pursuing positive alternatives. But it is not enough" (14). For Levitas, utopia is no longer a vehicle of criticism, so the dystopian mode becomes dominant in contemporary culture.

Lyman Tower Sargent, in his article "Three faces of Utopianism Revisited," becomes convinced that "critical utopias are no longer is important as they were when Moylan initially characterized them" (8). Fredric Jameson also declares the end of utopian imagination on the social level. He remarks that "at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment ..... and that therefore the best Utopia are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). Therefore, the critical potential of utopia ended, especially at the beginning of the 1990s. The failure of critical utopian imagination is also a result of its inclination toward totalitarianism. Levitas states, "This is partly the result of deliberate attempts to invalidate any proposed alternative to capitalism; anti-utopianism is a standard weapon in the armory of the status quo" (15). Thus, because of this association with totalitarianism, postmodernism makes it difficult to imagine alternative social order through utopian imagination. She asserts, "Utopia may still express desire, but it does not articulate hope" (16). In this sense, utopia is not entirely



dead. It continues in dystopia, in which classical dystopia contained a defeated utopia.

On the other hand, postmodern dystopia differs from classical dystopia by leaving space for the possibility of a better society. Postmodern dystopias present a dystopian world, but they also move on to the point of transition, which leads to utopia. Moylan and Baccolini identify this kind of dystopia as a critical dystopia. They define critical dystopias as "texts that maintain a utopian impulse. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all" (*Dark Horizons* 7). They add those science fiction writers, mainly women writers such as Octavia E. Butler, Cadigan, Charnas, Robinson, Piercy, and Le Guin, "confronted the decade's simultaneous silencing and cooptation of Utopia by turning to dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with the changing social reality." Those writers, according to Moylan and Baccolini, "refunctioned dystopia as a critical narrative from that worked against the grain of the grim economic, political, and cultural climate" (*Dark Horizon* 3). In this sense, critical dystopia exists as a compelling narrative framework that challenges the utopian imagination and explains its cultural ubiquity.

Critical dystopia also differs from critical utopia by presenting a post-apocalyptic society but maintains the utopian impulse within the text. Therefore, critical dystopia is a hybrid genre. It includes both utopian and dystopian features. It refuses the binary categorization of static utopia and static dystopia. Dunja Mohr describes these texts as "transgressive utopian dystopias" to emphasize the hybrid nature of these texts. She adds, "In the logic of transgression, thesis and antithesis do not exist; transgressive utopian dystopias are neither, in a movement of fluidity they describe the interplay and incorporate both" (10). Thus, the connection between utopia and dystopia is dynamic. It rejects the universalities of utopianism and opens a new space for understanding postmodern dystopia. However, it contains utopia as a dream.

The texts of critical dystopia open the door to creating a narrative that contains some features of a utopian context. Moylan and Baccolini remark that this narrative is "like its eutopian predecessors, *critical* in its poetic and political substance" (*Dark Horizons* 3). Both critical dystopian and critical utopian narratives

share the characteristic of social dreaming and the critique of the capitalist society. According to Jim Miller, critical dystopias are "motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that they force us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again" (337). In this sense, the dystopian genre in postmodernism is a kind of "genre blurring," in which although the dystopian texts "offer a detailed pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives, some affiliate with utopian tendencies as they maintain a horizon of hope" (Moylan, *Scraps* 147). Critical dystopia does not only warn the readers about a dystopian future. It offers a utopian space, enabling the readers to act to prevent such a dystopian future.

Miller suggests that the narratives of postmodern dystopia are intertextual and hybrid. The hybridity of this narrative challenges genre categorization and makes them practical tools. The main emphasis of such a hybrid narrative is "to undermine ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between self and other and explore possibilities for alternative and non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity within which the difference of aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed" (337). Like traditional dystopias, writers of critical dystopias portray a near future that is corrupt with capitalist power, highly developed technology, environmental degradation, and a weak state. But they retain the utopian impulse by attempting to represent the individuals' experience of these problems to encourage them to create a better future. They warn the readers that the future is not only worse but also different, and they must go beyond the limitation of the present to prevent the degradation of this future.

Accordingly, critical dystopia shares with utopia an essential characteristic which is social dreaming. Nevertheless, dystopia achieves this goal by using specific formal strategies distinctly different from utopia. A dystopian novel begins in the middle of a terrible new world. It directly deals with the dystopian features in this world and focuses on the character who questions this dystopian society. To represent such a dystopian society, writers use textual estrangement and defamiliarization. Moylan and Baccolini point out that the dystopian text "opens *in media res* within the nightmarish society, cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy and normality of the location. No dream or trip is taken to get to this place of everyday life" (*Dark Horizon* 5). In this sense, cognitive estrangement is crucial in understanding such dystopian text. Stillman also remarks that



"Critical dystopias offer a new world in which the familiar is defamiliarized by being presented outside the dominant interpretive paradigms, from a new perspective, and in novel contexts; in which the unthinkable (such as nuclear war) is thought and present as real" (366). Therefore, the reader of this genre must mentally overcome this cognitive estrangement to comprehend this future.

Thus, critical dystopian novels represent a fictional world worse than the reader's present world. However, they contain a utopian urge within the work by using the open-ended technique, giving the protagonists a space to confront their current situations. Moylan and Baccolini remark that critical dystopias "allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (*Dark Horizons* 7). In this sense, critical dystopias open a space for resistance, in which the protagonist and the reader can contest and resist the subjugation. Critical dystopia develops a counter-narrative in which the character resists the terrible situation in the dystopian society.

Critical dystopias shed light on human actions after catastrophic events, which lead to a powerful institution that controls and manipulates human beings. Therefore, citizens in this society experience alienation and displacement. The hegemonic power uses language to control people. Moylan and Baccolini remark, "language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure. Therefore, the dystopian protagonist's resistance often begins with a verbal confrontation and the reappropriation of language, since s/he is generally prohibited from using language" (*Dark Horizon* 5-6). In this sense, dystopian resistance depends on controlling the language and means of representation. By developing a counter-narrative, the protagonist of the dystopian novel can create a social critique and, therefore, utopian anticipation within the dystopian text.

Moreover, memory is another key feature that helps the protagonist to resist the dystopic situation. The function of dystopia is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of the present society. Therefore, Baccolini remark that dystopia is rooted in history ("Ursula K. Le Guin's Critical Dystopias" 38). Consequently, to resist the dystopian situation, memory – as a language – plays an essential role. In dystopian novels, memory is an effective tool that leads to a move toward changing society. Baccolini states that





language, memory, and critical knowledge of history "are all necessary ingredients to stimulate resistance in dystopias" (39). In dystopian novels, remembering the past helps the protagonist resist the oppressive situation and maintain hope. In this sense, memory becomes the catalyst of change. It is a way to empower the protagonist. Moylan points out that "With the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order, but by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and 'speak back' to hegemonic power" (*Scraps* 149). In this sense, remembering the past help the dystopian subjects realize their situation and imagine their way toward a better future.

Accordingly, protagonists in critical dystopian novels resist their situations by remembering the past and taking control of the language. Therefore, critical dystopia becomes the central focus of feminist writing in the late twentieth century. Baccolini remarks that feminist writers consider science fiction and dystopia particularly an oppositional strategy against hegemonic ideology. She adds:

women's science fiction novels have contributed to the exploration and subsequent breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions – those damaging stereotypes – about gendered identities by addressing, in a dialectical engagement with tradition, themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity ("The Persistence of Hope" 520)

For feminists, the dystopian genre becomes a vehicle of resistance because it helps them to reject and challenge universal assumptions, singularity, and objective knowledge.

Critical dystopia enables female writers to strive for change. It celebrates the character's ability to challenge the dictatorial power to create an alternative reality. In this sense, the feminist critical dystopia refers to the negative critique of patriarchy brought into effect by the dystopic principles. Ildney Cavalcanti points out that the feminist critical dystopia not only refers to the critique of patriarchy but also to the textual self-awareness that enables feminist writers to construct "utopian elsewhere." In this sense, the feminist critical dystopia "may have a crucial effect in the formation of consolidation of a specifically critico-feminist public readership"



(67). Thus, feminist critical dystopia represents women's expression of hope and fear of the future.

Gender oppression is the source of conflict in feminist dystopia. In "The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia," Ildney Cavalcanti points out that "feminist dystopia are intrinsically critical genre," in which the term critical in this context "implies the important element of textual self-criticism" and due to a kind of resistance at the end (48). Feminist critical dystopias focus on the construction of gender by telling stories about men's oppression and women's attempts at liberation. They also emphasize the linguistic manipulation that silences women within the dystopic spaces. However, they open a space for these women to take control by telling the stories of their oppression.

Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler succeed in creating a dystopian world that is slightly combined with utopianism, in which they open a space for their protagonists to resist and dream for a better society. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood opens the text in the middle of a dystopic society in which women and the narrator, Offred among them, live in a hopelessly oppressive regime called Gilead. The novel represents the near future, where pollution and ecological degradation lead to birth defects. As the birth rate decreases, religious leaders take control of society. They started a fundamentalist theocratic regime based on gender oppression. Also, Butler, in *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), represents the post-apocalyptic United States, where hunger and poverty lead to violence and human savagery. She portrays the near future, where economic inequality, global warming, and political fanaticizes lead to social division, suffering, and oppression. Her protagonist suffers oppression and racism, which leads her to resist and create a new religion called Earthseed.

Baccolini considers *The Handmaid's Tale* one of the earliest critical dystopian novels ("The Persistence of Hope" 520-21). Atwood prefers to call the novel "ustopia." A term she coined to refer to both utopia and dystopia in the same novel. She states, "As ustopia is by definition elsewhere, it is almost always bracketed by two journeys: the one that transports the tale-teller to the other place and the one that transports him (or her) back so he can deliver his report to us" (*Dire Cartographies* 12). In *Handmaid's Tale*, Offred records her story on tapes they found after many years and lets others know about her life in Gilead. According to Moylan definition of critical dystopia, Fiona Tolan



argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* is categorized as critical dystopia rather than critical utopia. She adds, "the critical utopia situates the author within the utopian vision, as insider .... whereas, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both Atwood and the reader are situated, with Offred, as an alien within the Gilead regime" (156). In the novel, Atwood rejects the utopian ideology of both Gilead and the second wave of feminism by emphasizing the dystopic future of the United States.

The novel shares the characteristics of both utopian and dystopian fiction. The protagonist, Offred, lives in a hopeless oppressive society, but she finds in her illegal affair with Nick, the driver of the Commander, a hope for a positive future. On the other hand, the republic of Gilead represents a prototypical utopia, which appears as a perfect place. But life in it is very oppressive, especially for women. In Gilead, women are only vessels of procreation, and women who are not fertile are treated as "unwomen." The Commander summarizes the utopian concept of Gilead. He tells Offred "We thought we could do better ... better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some" (274).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood combines utopian and dystopian elements. She describes Gilead as a typical dystopian society that depends on fear. At the beginning of the novel, Offred gives the reader a glimpse of her life in Gilead. She mentions,

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouth. In this way we exchange names from bed to bed. Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June (2)

Women's names are forbidden in this society, so saying names is an act of resistance for Offred. She believes that her name is precious, and she will keep it to use it again one day. She says, "My name is not Offred, I have another name." She considers her name important and will "keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (72). Atwood attempts to maintain the sense of hope not only in Offred's mind but also in her readers' minds.



To maintain this sense of hope within the text, Atwood narrates the story by remembering past events. Throughout the text, Offred remembers life in Gilead, which is interrupted by her life before, especially with her husband, Luke, and her daughter. She remembers, "I think about Laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I earned myself. I think about having such control" (21). These fragmented memories help Offred to stay alive, hoping for a better future. Martina Mittag asserts that Atwood draws utopian energies by telling of memories. She adds that this sense of history is essential in a "society trying to obliterate its past by brainwashing its citizens and destroying its own written records and computers" (259). By telling both the horrors of Gilead and memories before it, Atwood defies the categorization of utopia and dystopia.

Telling the story gives Offred a space to challenge the Gileadean patriarchal system. Throughout telling the handmaid's story, Atwood critiques the present situation and warns us of the worst future. In this sense, telling the story is essential for critical dystopia because it maintains hope within the text regardless of the dystopic situation of the protagonist. Offred tells us, "If it's a story I'm telling, then I 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" (34). Therefore, telling the story about this oppressive regime is a shift in power, where the dominant discourse becomes less defined by this interruption. Lauren Lacey points out that critical dystopian visions resemble classic dystopias "and trace the way power can become increasingly rigid and solidified into domination; that is the case in Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*. Crucially, critical dystopias – regardless the paths of their speculations – do not close down all avenues of hope" (106).

According to Moylan, critical dystopias reject the closure of utopian ideology and the conservative dystopian tendency by maintaining a utopian impulse within the text (Scraps 189). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood maintains this utopian impulse within the text through the power of telling the story. *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes the power of telling the story, which turns out to be self-awareness and self-reflexivity. Tolan remarks, "in its self-conscious examination of the function of narrative and the role of narrative in creating the historical record, Offred's tale is a metafictional examination of metahistory" (144). Thus, Atwood



questions the past and the present. By doing this, she gives her protagonist and reader a new way of imagining the future.

As a critical dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* opens a space for the protagonist to resist. Atwood, like other feminist dystopian writers, introduces a protagonist that suffers oppression because of the idea of the supposed utopian society. Offred and other women are marginalized and oppressed by the oppressive regime. Women's desires are entirely ignored. However, like other feminist critical dystopian novels, Atwood opens a space for her protagonist to resist this oppression and marginalization. One way to resist this oppressive regime is by taking control of the language. Handmaids are not allowed to communicate with others or express their feeling. They are also not allowed to read or write anything.

In the novel, Atwood asserts that the manipulation of language is crucial in achieving power. Therefore, the Gilead regime prevents women from reading or writing to be able to control and then manipulate them. That is because human beings use language to restore memories, enabling them to achieve power. In other words, a language is a tool of power used to oppress and silence. Also, using language can be a means of resistance, especially in critical dystopias. In Gilead, even conversation is restricted. The handmaids speak to each other in a minimal way, and they suppose not to speak to the wives. Thus, when Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner, says "Mayday" to Offred, she becomes perplexed because the word means "help me." Offred says, "Mayday used to be a distress signal." She remembers Luke, who told her about this word:

Do you know what is come from? Said Luke. Mayday?

No, I said. It's a strange word to use for that, isn't it?

Newspapers and coffee, on Sunday morning, before she was born. There were still newspapers, then. We used to read them in bed.

It's French, he said. From m'aidez

Help me (36)

Offred realizes the power of language in creating resistance. She also becomes hungry to use language. She starts to use and remember language as a way to identify herself as a valuable entity:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French



word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself (110).

Offred believes that language will help her to be complete and remember her life before Gilead.

In this sense, when Offred, deprived of opportunities to read and write, finds a message on the cupboard floor, she becomes excited and repeats it despite not knowing the meaning of the sentence. She realizes that the former handmaid wrote this sentence, "in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorun*" (69). Offred wanders about this sentence, but she says, "It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (69). For Offred, this sentence becomes a prayer; she repeats it to inspire her and gives her strength. The importance of this sentence increases after the Commander tells Offred its meaning: "Don't let the bastards wear you down." It becomes a message that Offred keeps to give her hope to resist the policies of Gilead. David Hogsette points out that Offred uses language to construct "a subjectivity that can enable her to serve as an agent to social and political change" (102). Accordingly, Offred's connection to language enables her to construct her identity within a society that denies her as a human being.

Offred realizes that she can use language to create a subject that can challenge the oppressive reality. Dystopian regimes, like Gilead, maintain power through the control of language. On the other hand, dystopian dissidents attempt to resist by reclaiming language. Moylan and Baccolini remark that the structural strategy of narrative and counter-narrative depends on the control of language (*Dark Horizon* 5). In this sense, language plays an essential role in critical dystopia, which helps maintain power and create resistance. In the novel, Offred realizes that language can be used as a weapon of resistance through her illegal meeting with the Commander. He asks her to play scrabble with him, which is forbidden, dangerous, and desirable. Offred thinks the Commander "compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs" (139). As the Commander attempts to show off power, Offred rediscovers how to use language to recreate her identity. She describes his desire to play scrabble as a weakness, which is "like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye of it, this weakness of his, I may able to see my way clear (136). She learns to manipulate him: "I win the first game, I let him



win the second: I still haven't discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange" (139). Ironically, Hogsette remarks, the Commander office becomes a "training ground for a growing dissenting voice. Offred redevelops her control of language, thus enabling her to recreate and ultimately assert her own subjectivity" (104). Finally, she realizes that using language is a kind of resistance.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood resists purely dystopian categories by providing a framework for approaching utopian idealization and dystopian apocalyptic society. Mittag remarks that through "open-endedness and the self-reflexivity of the text that Atwood resists purely dystopian categories" (259). In this sense, the function of the open-ended text is to maintain hope in the text's center and construct an alternative way to see the present and future. Lacey states that the open-ended nature of critical dystopias helps them contain a horizon of hope that can open new possibilities (106). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood represents a dark future and a critique of the present to open a space for alternative ways of thinking about the present and future. This alternative way depends on resisting the dystopic situation. Therefore, Offred believes that must be a resistance somewhere; "there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (105).

Later, when Offred reconstructs her identity, she realizes that there is an underground network that resists the oppressive situation. Ofglen tells her about the resistance:

"You can join us," she says.

"Us?" I say. There is an us then, there's a we. I knew it.

"You didn't think I was the only one," she says.

I didn't think that. It occurs to me that she may be a spy, a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow. But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening (240).

This conversation helps Offred to hope for a better future. Even when Ofglen commits suicide to save the network, Offred discovers that Nick is one of the group, and he helps her escape to a safe place where she can tell her story. Finally, when Nick comes to take her, he asks her to trust him. She says, "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be

helped" (307). Through this open-endedness, Atwood enhances the sense of hope within the dystopia.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is an open-ended dystopia. Open-endedness is a crucial element in critical dystopia. Butler opens her novel in the middle of a catastrophic situation. Her protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, a fifteen-year-old girl attempts to survive in this dystopic society. She faces a social, environmental, and economic catastrophic situation. Lauren describes this situation at the beginning of the novel:

Worse for me, they (the street poor) often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs. .... They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sore. They don't get enough to eat do they're malnourished – or they eat bad food and poison themselves. As I rode, I tried no to look around at them, but I couldn't help seeing – collecting – some of their general misery (10-11)

Butler writes the novel as a diary to tell the readers about the near future. She imagines the United States in 2024 after a catastrophic disaster, which divided the community into two groups: the people who live in a gated community and the "street poor" people.

Lauren believes that the gated community is a fantasy and that things must be changed one day. She knows that her community will not survive and must find an alternative way to live. Lauren looks at the stars and believes that space can solve their problems. She wants to get ready when things get worse. She tells her friend, Joanne, "We can get ready. That's what we've got to do now. Get ready for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, to get ready to make a life afterward" (54). Lauren's intention to survive and change this dystopic situation is resistance. As she expected, the street poor attacked her community. They burn houses and kill many people, including Lauren's family. She is now alone and decides to travel north with two strange people; Harry and Zahra.

Lauren cannot ignore the situation and try to live a normal life. She tells Joanne, "It's hard enough just to do that in this world" (29). She believes changing the situation is the only way to escape this catastrophe. Her vision led her to develop a new religion called "Earthseed." She writes, "The particular God-is-change belief system that seems right to me will be called Earthseed. I've tried to name it before. Failing that, I've tried to leave it unnamed. Neither effort has made me comfortable. Name plus purpose equals focus





for me" (77). Unlike Offred, Lauren confronts the belief system in her community. She has a chance to read and write, which helps her to develop an alternative way to resist the dystopic situation. Jerry Phillips remarks "Lauren's concept of God gives her a basis on which to build 'a future that makes sense,' in a present moment that seems all but determined by a 'rotting past'" (303).

Change is a keyword for Lauren to survive. She writes in her diary that "God is change" (15). While her people want things to return to "normal," she believes that change is the only way to push them into the future. Phillips states, "The proposition that "God is change" brings to the fore Butler's concern with immanence in historical process, the way that time speaks to the unfolding of latent possibilities in the world" (302). Lauren tells Joanne about the history to convince her that change is inevitable: "They were slow changes compared to anything that might happen here, but it took a plague to make some of people realize that things *could* change" (original emphasize 56). In this sense, Butler aims to incite her readers to consider alternative ways to think about the present and future.

At the beginning of the novel, Lauren admits that she no longer believes in her father's God. For her, God existed to be shaped. Lauren develops a new theology in her diary to help her and her community survive. This new theology is a counter-narrative. According to Moylan, Lauren's journal is a theological and political manifesto. He adds that "this narrative machine not only delineates the terrible world of the 2020s but also self-reflexively constitutes the basis of counter-narrative that speaks against the absence of master narrative of the distant corporate powers as it negates the status quo" (227). Lauren names her diary "Earthseed: The Book of Living" to shape her counter-narrative opposing social chaos.

She believes writing is the first step to finding an alternative way to survive in this society. She writes, "Sometimes I write to keep from going crazy. This is a world of things I don't feel free to talk to anyone about" (52). As a young girl in a dystopic society, she realizes language is vital in resisting this situation. In other words, Lauren's journal serves as resistance and gives her hope in this dystopic future. In critical dystopia, using language in general and writing, in particular is a self-awareness and act of resistance. Keith Elphic adds that writing is not only an act of resistance but also "a way for characters to understand and alter the future of a declining dystopian society. Thus writing is not merely a personal act; it carries a communal goal within its prose that is intended for

a diverse audience of readers" (179). In this sense, writing amid this social dystopia represents power and control for Lauren.

Critical dystopia is a hybrid genre in which utopian and dystopian elements combine. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler links dreams and nightmares to show the dystopic future of American society. Stillman points out that Butler "shows that the dystopias limit the lives and twist the dreams of many" (15). Lauren sees how political power causes dystopia and reduces the possibilities for a better way of life. She remarks that this political power leaves them to live in fear. She says, "But everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, the crime, drugs, you know. I didn't believe we would be allowed to set behind our walls, looking clean and fat and rich to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, jobless, filthy people outside" (184). Thus, when things fall apart in her community, she starts a journey to find or even create a better place. For Lauren to achieve this goal, she needs a new ideology to help her create this place. Stillman states, "Butler's dystopian images or maps serve as a warning to the present because she ties her images to existing problem and ideologies" (15). In this sense, Lauren creates her religion because her father's God stops speaking to her. Her religion, the Earthseed, represents the ideology of the utopian space that Lauren wants to create because it depends on the ideas of change and accepting difference.

Miller remarks that Butler, in her critical dystopias, forces us to "work through the dystopian before we can begin the effort to imagine a better world" (339). Throughout this dystopia, Butler gives us a glimpse of hope in her protagonist "Earthseed." Lauren started her book of poems when she was fifteen, and at eighteen, she became a leader for a group of people who believed in a better future. Lauren writes in her diary:

I've finally got a title for my book of Earthseed verse – Earthseed the Book of Living. There are the Tibetan and the Egyptian Books of the Dead. Dad has copies of them. I've never heard of anything called a book of living, but I wouldn't care. I'm trying to speak – to write – the truth. I'm trying to be clear. I'm not interested in being fancy, or even original. Clarity and truth will be plenty, if I can only achieve them (122)

Elphick points out that characters of critical dystopias use language to maintain a rational understanding of the reality around them. He asserts, "It is this process of maintain an individual discourse that has the potential establish power within the individual and the community. The writing process becomes more



than affirming and articulating dissent" (177). Lauren realizes the power of words to change the world; therefore, she decides to teach people to read and write. She also preaches to her community about the power of persistence. She tells them that persistence can lead them to resist the present situation and give them hope for the future. Miller points out that Butler leaves us with "the notion of an Earthseed community, an inspiring utopian political myth that prizes diversity, but avoids a fragmented identity politics and serves as a good model for the kind of new political art" (349). To create hope, Lauren needs to tell people about her vision to change the situation. She writes, "if it happens that there are other people outside somewhere preaching my truth, I'll join them. Otherwise, I'll adapt where I must, take what opportunities I can find or make, hang on, gather students, and teach" (123). Therefore, during her journey to the North, she begins to gather people and tell them about her vision. The journey started with two people with Lauren, and the number increased to nine.

Throughout the novel, Butler looks for hope. She calls on her reader to imagine the unimaginable to find alternative possibilities for the future. Butler incites her readers to seek possibilities of a better way of life, or what Moylan calls "utopian anticipation" (Scraps 147), which is the main characteristic of critical dystopia. Butler's protagonist believes that warning people is an act of hope; even when her father tells her that she is frustrating people, she believes that warning and teaching them is essential to resist this situation and find an alternative way to live in the future. Thus, in her journey to the North, she starts by teaching Zahra how to read and write and gives Harry her diary and poems to read to know her vision of the future.

Furthermore, Butler emphasizes that utopia is not a possibility, but it is a desirable attitude to save society from this catastrophic situation. Lauren believes the Earthseed community is the first step toward a better future. She aims to create "A unifying, purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy. A heaven that will be theirs to shape" (260). According to Lena Danielmeyer, Butler does not deny the significance of the utopian impulse. "On the contrary, it seems reasonable to claim that the impression of a hopeless, consumerist, capitalist reality has simply made possible of a different, yet no less powerful, form of utopianism" (5). Thus, Lauren's ultimate aim is not to create a



utopian place on Earth; instead, she believes that space and other planets are utopian spaces for human beings. She declares:

"The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars," I said. That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs – here today, gone tomorrow, our bone mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities, and so what (220).

Butler and her protagonist do not believe in utopia as a blueprint, but they yearn for an answer to the present crisis to prevent this degradation of the future. In this sense, Butler introduces a powerful critique of reality.

Danielmeyer points out that dystopian fiction like *Parable of the Sower* "automatically serve as instruments of immanent social criticism which goes hand in hand with utopia" (5). Butler asserts that environmental and economic degradation reveals social injustice and social inequality. Lauren criticizes the social and ideological situation. She believes the only way to save her society is by acting to change this situation. In this sense, change is the keyword for resisting the dystopic situation. It is the utopian impulse that Lauren attempts to create in her community. Marthias Thaler remarks that critical dystopias construct alternative worlds "in which human beings are subjected to serve adversity, but they leave room for the nurturing of hope" (88). Thus, Lauren realizes that space colonization is the only opportunity for human beings. She believes space is the future; the heaven people can shape.

For Lauren, the past is no longer accessible, so she focuses on reality to be able to change it. While the old people in her community look for the past, she looks for the future. Elphick remarks that characters in critical dystopian novels often go through "self-transformation that enable them to adjust their values to meet the declining condition of the dystopian landscape" (176). Baccolini remarks that memory is essential for critical dystopian characters because remembering the world before the chaos helps them resist the current situation. Unlike Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Lauren does not know the world before the catastrophe; she has no memory, so she only has the present, which seeks to change, and the future, which hopes to be better. Bankole, Lauren's husband, tells her "As bright as you are, I don't think you understand what we've lost. Perhaps that's a blessing." (310). She



can discard this past and focuses on the horror of dystopia. Elphick adds, "Along with discarding the past, characters reject their preconceived notions of morality and ideologies of a former society in order to understand the reality of dystopian present" (176). In this sense, Lauren creates the ideology that helps her to create a new community.

Critical dystopia takes into consideration the importance of hope that is embedded within the text. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler does not attempt to create a traditional utopia; instead, she introduces a utopian possibility through the idea of the "Earthseed" ideology that leads to what Lauren calls the "Acorn" community. This idea enhances the sense of open-endedness of the novel because Acorn appears to be a better place without any significant change in the current situation. Lauren hopes to create a better place depending on better ideology. She tells Bnkole about the hope of surviving:

So today we remembered the friends and the family members we've lost. We spoke our individual memories and quoted Bible passages, Earthseed verses, and bits songs and poems that were favorites of the living and or the dead. Then we buried our dead and we planted oak trees. Afterward, we sat together and talked and ate a meal and decided to call this place Acorn (311)

Despite Bankole's pessimistic view, Lauren attempts to construct an alternative society to create a space for opposing the dystopic situation and creating hope for the future. Using Earthseed as a new discursive form for understanding the world, Lauren strives to create a new meaning in a world that has lost any sense of meaning or purpose.

To conclude, critical dystopia, unlike classical dystopia, leaves space for the possibility of a better society. It maintains the utopian impulse within the text. Therefore, critical dystopia is a hybrid genre because it refuses the binary categorization of static utopia and dystopia. As Moylan and Baccolini state, critical dystopia portrays a near future that is corrupt with capitalist power, but it shares with utopia the idea of social dreaming. Moreover, critical dystopia opens a space for resistance by developing a counter-narrative that enables the protagonist to resist the terrible situation in the dystopian society. By developing a counter-



narrative, the protagonist of the dystopian novel can create a social critique and, therefore, a utopian anticipation within the text.

By developing a critical dystopia in their novels, both Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler introduce a critique of capitalist society and warn their readers of the worse future. As critical dystopias, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Parable of the Sower* combine dystopian and utopian elements. They portray a near terrible future due to capitalist and consumerist culture and open space for their protagonists to dream of a better society. Atwood and Butler open a space for their protagonist to resist the dystopic situation by using language and memory as weapons to challenge the hegemonic power in their societies. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred reconstructs her identity by using language despite the restriction of her society about using language. Memory also helps her to maintain hope for resistance. Also, Lauren uses language to create a new ideology that enables her to create a new society. Her "Earthseeds: the Book of Living" becomes a manifesto of a utopian dream. Atwood and Butler represent counter-narratives that criticize the capitalist society and urge their readers to imagine an alternative way of living to avoid this terrible future. Furthermore, open-endedness is another characteristic of critical dystopia that Atwood and Butler use to maintain the utopian impulse within the texts. Both novels end with hope for a better future and a better society. They leave a space for the readers to imagine an alternative way to create a better future.



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لمحة عن الأمل: قصة مارجريت أتوود حكاية الخادمة وأوكتافيا بتلر حكاية الزارع باعتبارها

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### المستخلص:

يجسد الخيال البائس في أواخر القرن العشرين عمليات وممارسات الفكر الفلسفي والثقافي في أواخر فترة ما بعد الحداثة. يختلف ديستوبيا ما بعد الحداثة عن الواقع المرير الكلاسيكي من خلال ترك مساحة لإمكانية مجتمع أفضل. وجد الاستكشاف الخيالي للمكان الأفضل ، وليس الأسوأ ، شكلاً جديداً لما يحدده توم مويلان على أنه ديستوبيا حرج. هذا النوع من الروايات البائسة يحرر القراء من المتواليات التقييمية ثنائية الأبعاد للخيال الكلاسيكي البائس. علاوة على ذلك ، فإن الواقع المرير الحرج يحيي الواقع المرير التقليدي من خلال توسيع الأمل ليشمل اقتراحاً غير محدد لعالم أفضل. تبحث هذه الورقة في الدافع اليوتوبيا في روايتين نقديتين بائسة. مارجريت أتوود حكاية الخادمة (١٩٨٥) ومثل أوكتافيا بتلر عن الزارع (١٩٩٣). كلتا الروايتين تبنيان عوالم بديلة حيث يعاني البشر من معاناة شديدة ، لكن لديهم مساحة لرعاية الأمل. تمثل حكاية Atwood's The Handmaid's معاناة النساء في الدولة الشيوقراطية. خلال هذا الواقع المرير ، يجد بطل الرواية طريقة لمقاومة هذا الموقف. تحدث قصة بتلر عن الزارع في عام ٢٠٢٤ عندما يعاني المجتمع من تدهور بيئي بسبب تغير المناخ. تخلق بطلة الرواية ديناً جديداً يمكن أن يساعدها في إنشاء مساحة مثالية لشعبها حتى تتمكن من السفر إلى الفضاء للعثور على نبات آخر حيث يمكنها هي وأتباعها بدء حياة جديدة. ينتقد كل من أتوود وبتلر المجتمع ويوجهان رسالة قوية مفادها أنه يمكن للناس النضال من أجل الحرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الواقع المرير النقدي ، ما بعد الحداثة ، توم مويلان ، الدافع اليوتوبي ، نقد الرأسمالية

الكلمات الإفتتاحية: الواقع المرير النقدي ، ما بعد الحداثة ، توم مويلان ، الاندفاع اليوتوبي ، نقد الرأسمالية