



Reflections of Reality: A Study of Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

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Abstract

In a world full of violence and suffering, dystopia serves as a powerful tool to reflect the existing condition of society. From the time it emerged as a genre in the twentieth century to the present day, it continues to take existing social and political concerns into consideration and amplify them to an extreme level. In the last few decades, there have been several women writers who penned dystopian narratives, portraying a society where women are forced to live under the control of the patriarchal government which snatched their basic rights away. The rise in dystopian writing was mainly because of abortion ban politics and violence against women all over the world. Thus, in this context, the paper aims to analyse two dystopian novels *The Water Cure* (2018) by Sophie Mackintosh and *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) by Louise Erdrich, which delve into the complexities and anxieties of the existing society, to see how the social and political circumstances shaped their dystopian narratives. This paper argues that by portraying real-world issues such as gender inequality, oppression, destruction of personal freedom, and violence, both writers use their narratives to critique the existing social and political landscapes, effectively bringing forth pressing issues and prompting readers to question the norms of society. Their dystopian visions serve as a powerful commentary on the need for social and political reform.

Keywords: Dystopia, Control, Resistance, Reflection, Social Critique.

Introduction

Dystopia is a widely used term to describe an imaginary society where people's lives are restricted to certain rules and norms that they are bound to follow. According to the definition provided by the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), "dystopia is an imaginary place which is as bad as possible". The term became popular in the twentieth century when it began to be used for a bulk of fictional works that imagined totalitarian governments that ruled the society by restricting citizens' basic rights and forcing them to live under surveillance so they would not

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be able to resist. The imagination of such a futuristic world was in vogue during the World Wars when the ideologies of Mussolini and Hitler made people believe that a dystopian world was about to happen in reality. As Tom Moylan (2000) states,

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt and steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. (p. xi)

The Iron Heel (1907) by Jack London and *Swastika Nights* (1937) by Katherine Burdekin are products of such imagination. Although the term dystopia was delayed in its application to a genre of literature, the trend of imagining a future filled with chaos and disruption was present in the earlier centuries. The term took its shape from utopia, devoted to an ideal imaginary place, where everything seems pleasing to the eyes. The word 'utopia' was created by Thomas More by combining two Greek terms 'ou' (No) and 'topos' (place) in his famous work *Utopia* (1516). Opposite to utopia, in 1868, John Stuart Mill used dystopia to describe a place where everything is worst by adding the Greek term 'dys' (bad) to utopia. While utopia focuses on changing the world into an ideal place by removing all wicked practices, dystopia shows the consequences of such practices. Both utopia and dystopia are connected to each other. One cannot make a perfect place without forcing people to follow certain norms and depriving them of their rights. Even an ideal place like a utopia has the elements of dystopia for some sections of society. Some people's utopia might be a dystopia for others. Whether it is in Plato's *Republic* or Thomas More's *Utopia*, the imagination of ideal places was based at the cost of delimiting certain elements, whether ideas, people, or practices. The construction of utopia often comes from suppressing freedoms and individual rights typically done to maintain harmony in society. These limitations imposed certain questions about the ethics of utopia whether it is created for everyone or a certain number of people in power. The imagination of both utopia and dystopia plays a significant role in reflecting the conditions of society. The social and political surroundings of the time had a huge impact on the creation of such worlds.

Although dystopia as a genre flourished in the twentieth century, the trend continues even in recent times. Both male and female writers have written dystopian novels, however, this paper has taken up two women's dystopian novels *The Water Cure* (2018) by Sophie Mackintosh and *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) by Louise Erdrich. On the one hand, *The Water Cure* deals with how the attempts to create a utopian paradise ended up building up a dystopia. On the other, *Future Home of the Living God* shows the worsening condition of women in a totalitarian government-ruled state.

Sophie Mackintosh is a British novelist who has published three novels in which her debut novel *The Water Cure* was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2018. Her other novels include *Blue Ticket* (2020), a futuristic novel that tells the story of women who only live to procreate and *Cursed Bread* (2023) set during the time of Pont-Saint-Esprit Mass Poisoning in 1951. Her dystopian novel, *The Water Cure* is written from the perspective of three women Lia, Grace, and Sky who craft the story based on their experiences on an isolated island. The narratives alternate from one to another. A strictly chronological order is not followed in the novel and the narratives jump from past to present and reflect the disoriented state of the characters. The small chapters read like vignettes enhancing the suspense and unease leaving a gap for the reader to fill in. Their parents brought them to an island which is situated far from the mainland of toxic masculinity. The father known in the story as the King made them believe that the world outside the island is dangerous which they call a 'toxin-filled world'.

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Whenever the girls want to know more about this toxic world, they are always deferred by the king for unknown reasons. The novel is written from the perspective of the King's three daughters Lia, Grace, and Sky. Lia and Grace primarily unfold their experiences on the island. During their time on the island, they undergo various therapies imposed by their parents to purify emotions and feelings intending to protect them from the outside world. The extreme torture both physically and mentally shaped their narratives. There comes a time once a year when they are supposed to choose one person to love more than the others and leave a person to be neglected the whole year. The novel grapples with the traumatic experiences of the three daughters and their distressing narratives. Even being the narrators of their own story, the daughters remain in the dark with mysteries and deceptions. The environment created in the novel is hardly believed to be a dystopia but when one gives it a closer look only then can be found a true dystopia.

Louise Erdrich is an award-winning American writer who has tried her hands at fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and books for children. She has written more than 28 books. Being recognised as one of the important writers of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance, Erdrich depicted her sense of Ojibwe identity throughout her works. Her novel *The Night Watchman* (2020) won her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2021. Erdrich's *Future Home of Living God*, published in 2017, centres around a pregnant woman named Cedar Hawk Songmaker who strives hard to survive in a totalitarian state that imposes restrictions on the freedom of pregnant women. The birth rate has declined in the state and women are not able to produce in the same way once they could. In order to maintain the birth rate, the state has taken control of reproduction which led to restricting women's rights to their bodies. Cedar was pregnant when the state declared an emergency. The United States has turned into a totalitarian state and the government has made rigid rules for reproduction and started capturing all the pregnant women in the state. The prisoners of the central jail have been set free and the space is now being used to keep women there. Cedar makes all possible efforts to escape from the capture to secure an appropriate future for her child.

Cedar's struggles for survival in *Future Home of the Living God* and the three daughters' traumatic experiences at an isolated island in *The Water Cure* serve as a direct representation of the existing situations where control, trauma and isolation become tools for perpetuating power. The selected novels were written during a time when women were fighting for their reproductive rights across the country. Abortion bans politics in the USA and other countries gave a significant rise in the portrayal of dystopian societies which largely came from the pen of women writers. Therefore, this paper is an analysis of the depiction of the dystopian settings in the selected contemporary novels *The Water Cure* by Sophie Mackintosh and *Future Home of the Living God: A Novel* by Louise Erdrich in order to see the way the writers use to criticise their social and political surroundings. The paper investigates in what ways the novels explore the themes of gender oppression and patriarchal control and how the female characters deal with the situation. Narrative techniques including unreliable narration, fragmented structure, and use of symbols to reflect the psychological state of the character become important sources in the depiction of dystopian societies which the writer intentionally uses to depict a more realistic society. Therefore, this paper also focuses on the narrative technique used in the selected novels to see to what extent it reflects the real condition of society.

Social and Political Contexts

The social and political context plays a crucial role in developing themes and narration of any literary work. Writers often respond to the existing issues around them through their writings. The depiction of sexual violence, gender oppression and biases, control over bodies, and

suppression of individual rights does not come from the imagination of the writer but from the direct or indirect experiences of real life. In one of the interviews when Margaret Atwood was asked about the issues depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), she said "I didn't put anything into the book that had not already happened at some time at some place in history or which was not happening when I was writing the book" (Atwood, 2017). *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a classic example of dystopia. Margaret Atwood depicts a society ruled by a theocratic totalitarian government that deprived women of their rights and made them merely vessels of procreation.

The increasing cases of sexual harassment and gendered violence gave a significant push to the depiction of such themes in literature. The selected dystopian novels *The Water Cure* and *Future Home of the Living God* are written in such circumstances. The MeToo movement started in 2006 and became popular in 2017 after the American actress Alyssa Milano's tweet which encouraged women to share their sexual assaults or harassment on the public platform, had a great impact on these works. Furthermore, women's protests for reproduction rights in countries like the USA, UK, Argentina, Ireland etc. sparked the trend of dystopian fiction especially among women writers. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* became famous again while being used in protests against the government. Women protesters dressed in the handmaid's costumes to oppose abortion bills.

The condition of women in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia is much worse than the imaginary dystopia. In 2022, an Iranian woman Mahsa Amini was arrested for not covering her head with Hizaab and later she died in custody. The woman lost her life for not following the rules of her society. Not only limited to this, when the situation of war arises in any country women have faced gender-based atrocities and violence. Whether it is the Israel-Hamas war or the war between Ukraine and Russia, recent reports have shown that thousands of women have been subjected to sexual violence, including rape. If all these atrocities and exploitations had been happening all over the world, it would not be surprising if a woman writer depicted themes of reproduction, sexual assaults, and oppression in her work. Dystopia is not just an imaginary idea but a lived reality of many women around the world that serves as an inspiration for writers to depict the dystopian world. In one of her interviews, Sophie Mackintosh was asked why she put feminist themes in her novel. "I couldn't avoid making it feminist, with everything else happening in the larger world influencing the words I put on the page", she replied (Cowling, n.d.).

Thematic Analysis

The selected writers touch upon several themes, such as environmental consciousness, societal control, ethics of survival, and the quest for self-identity. However, the predominant themes used in the novels are control over women's bodies, struggle for survival, surveillance, oppression, and destruction of personal freedom. *The Water Cure* by Sophie Mackintosh is set on a mysterious isolated island detached from the other part of the world where three girls live with their parents. The outside world is described as a 'toxic-filled world' by their parents to keep them safe from the men of the outside world. The toxic is used as a metaphor to describe the patriarchal mindset the society carries within itself. In order to keep the daughters safe from this toxicity of the outside world, the parents array each possible way even if it leads to oppression. The king was the only man known to their daughters. Despite his wish to prevent his daughters from the toxic patriarchal environment of the mainland, the king could not resist himself to make one for them on the island itself. The rituals and norms that he set for the sisters which they are made to follow forcefully reflect his dominance in their lives.

In the past time as the daughters shared in their narratives, their home was a kind of

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sanatorium where assaulted women came to cure themselves through various rituals and prayers. However, the setting seems mysterious when the island which is supposed to be a shelter for wounded women becomes unsafe. The King creates such an environment to make his daughters believe that the outside world is filled with violence and toxicity and men are the most dangerous who might rape and assault them. The irony is the man who pretends to save his girls from the outside world himself creates a toxic environment for them. They are made to follow certain therapies which include extreme torture both physically and psychologically intended to help their bodies become stronger to fight against the toxic environment of the outside world. Some of the therapies are conducted to prevent feelings for others as Lia says,

Strong feelings weaken you, open up your body like a wound. It takes vigilance and regular therapies to hold them at bay. Over the years we have learned how to dampen them down, how to practise and release emotion under strict conditions only, how to own our pain. I can cough it into muslin, trap it as bubble under the water, let it from my very blood. (Mackintosh, 2018, p. 18)

The daughters are not allowed to stay together or talk to each other alone. Somewhere the fear of resistance existed in the solidarity of sisters that may have challenged the authority. The torture and trauma which women face in the King's world in the name of a 'cure' reflects how patriarchal society exerts control over women's bodies through violence, fear, and manipulation. The therapies, supposed to cure women, turn out to be doubtful when Grace's pregnancy has been disclosed. Although the novel does not directly confirm, the King might have been the father of Grace's child because he was the only man on the island. Grace was already pregnant when the other three men arrived on the island. The king not only manipulates their minds but also abuses his position of power over their bodies. This would align with the patriarchal control, turning the family into a space of abuse disguised as protection. Even when the King dies, he continues to dominate the psyche of the girls without his physical presence. His mysterious story of the outside world and not letting the girls know about the truth behind this 'toxin-filled world' raised several questions in their minds. The girls started questioning their surroundings and the teachings provided by their parents. Lia begins to question the absurd beliefs they were taught when she comes into contact with one of the three men. Her physical attraction towards Llew stands in direct opposition to her father's warning about men they were raised with. The writer has used themes like deceit, trauma, resistance, and oppression, along with the dystopian environment reflecting the condition of society and its potential future.

Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* is set in Minnesota where due to climate change the temperature has risen to 90 degrees and winter comes without snow. The characters are affected by the unpredictable scenario. The protagonist Cedar is four months pregnant and writes in her diary about this changing time,

Our world is running backwards. Or forward; or maybe sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped. I am sure somebody will come up with a name for what is happening, but I cannot imagine how everything around us and everything within us can be fixed. What is happening involves the invisible, the quanta of which we are created. Whatever is actually occurring, there is constant breaking news about how it will be handled—speculation, really, concerning what comes next—which is why I am writing an account. (Erdrich, 2017, p. 11)

The consequences of any catastrophe make everyone suffer despite the gender differences

however sufferings get doubled for women because of their bodies. Crisis, whether it is environmental, social, or political, often leads to breakdowns in law and order, making women more vulnerable to sexual violence, harassment, and gender-based exploitation. In *Future Home of the Living God*, Louise Erdrich explores various themes including resistance, survival and control over women's bodies. The novel depicts such a scenario where some environmental crisis happens and the fertility rate goes down and to maintain the birth ratio, the government imposes restrictions on the freedom of pregnant women and keeps them in government hospitals to monitor their delivery process. The novel draws a parallel connection between environmental degradation and control over the reproductive system. The reproduction became the concern of the government, leading to the control over women's bodies. The government collects the records of all the pregnant women in the country and forcibly captures them to live in a controlled environment. The fertile women are compulsorily made to gestate embryos so that the birth rate can be increased. The use of words like 'patriot' and 'womb volunteers' became popular to make people aware of their obligations towards society. The strange woman called 'mother' who appeared on Cedar's desktop screen said,

I wonder if you have the courage to save the country we love. We need you to be a Patriot. We need you to volunteer. If you are a woman, if you are pregnant, go to any of our Future Home Reception Centres. WV. Our chefs are waiting for you! (Erdrich, 2017, p. 114)

The word 'womb volunteer' is used by the government to refer to those women who are fertile and ready to produce children for the regulation of society. The government provides 'best rooms' for those women who are voluntarily ready to give birth in controlled circumstances.

Through Cedar's emotional journey of ensuring a secure future for her child, Louise critiques society's role in justifying the sufferings of women in the name of morality. Louise's real-life dilemma of identity is profoundly reflected in her work. She considers herself a part of the Ojibwe tribe as her maternal father belonged to this tribe and is also an active member of the federally recognised Native American Tribe of Ojibwe, The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. Cedar was born to Ojibwe parents but was brought up by white parents in America. Her adoptive parents Glenn and Sara provided her with a loving and stable upbringing however when the surroundings changed and she got to know about her pregnancy, it triggered an existential crisis that led her to seek out her biological roots. Louise has also gone through this dilemma of identity from childhood to adult life and put the experiences through Cedar's character.

Narrative Techniques

In classical dystopian fiction, the settings are created in such a way that one hardly believes them to be true. Whether it is Orwell's Oceania or Atwood's Gilead, the imaginary country seems far from reality. However, in recent dystopian narratives, the settings are depicted as more realistic and tangible rather than imaginary or futuristic ones. This shift from an imaginary to a realistic society reflects social concerns and fears as dystopia serves as a mirror of society. By creating a more realistic society using familiar locations and places, writers attempt to connect the story with the reader making societal issues feel more immediate and plausible. In *The Water Cure* and *Future Home of the Living God*, the settings are created in a way that seems realistic. On the one hand, *The Water Cure* is set on an island where the king has made his own world, on the other, Louise has depicted the story in America. Both of the settings are near to the future and while reading the novels one cannot make distinction whether the settings are fictional or real. The core quality of dystopian

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fiction is the imaginary setting in a futuristic world but in the selected novels the scenarios are different and feel more realistic than the classical dystopias.

The Water Cure is written in a non-linear style flashing back from the past to the present. The narratives shift from one person to another telling the story from different perspectives making it more interesting, fascinating and mysterious sometimes. All of the three daughters from whose perspectives the story is written have different experiences on the island and not very similar connections with their parents. On the one hand, Grace's narratives are addressed to his father displaying her soft corner towards him even when the tortures were extreme and harmful to them. On the other, Lia's narratives are satirical and even more critical towards her parents' actions. We find distinctive perspectives in the same oppressive environment. Along with this, Mackintosh uses a number of symbols that enhance the suspense and result in ambiguity. Water has been the central part of daughters' lives representing both cleansing and control. By following the Water Cure ritual, they are supposed to purify their harmful emotions and contamination from the outside world. It is the paradoxical symbol of both life and danger that signifies the potential for rebirth as well as the oppressive control on the lives.

Future Home of the Living God by Louise Erdrich is written in the first-person narration using an epistolary format. Cedar writes about her experiences in a dystopian world while addressing her unborn child. This epistolary structure of the novel creates a personal environment for the readers allowing them to wander through the protagonist's inner fears and hopes. It also makes reflections of the outer world. The protagonist's records of her experiences in such an environment where freedom is barely available illustrate the resistance. Erdrich has used a number of intertextual references to religious texts and indigenous beliefs which the protagonist often contemplates. As previously mentioned, through Cedar's quest for self-identity, Louise puts her own dilemmas of maintaining her Ojibwe identity as she says "I am also an insecure Ojibwe, a fledging Catholic, an over striving brain cooking up conflicting dramas," (Erdrich, 2017, p. 65). Throughout the novel, Cedar grapples with this conflict of identity as she says "in reading my favourite Hans Kung..., and trying to live by the seven Ojibwe teachings, Truth Respect Bravery Generosity Wisdom Humility, which I've only read about and do not know from, say, a real Ojibwe person" (p. 63). Even the metaphor of weaving and knitting the yarn in the novel alludes to the way of freedom and resistance. In many native mythologies, 'Spider-Woman' refers to the figure who embodies creation, wisdom and patience through weaving and protects. Cedar calls her roommate Tia the 'Spider Nun' who unravels the blanket yarn to make a rope to escape. This resisting action refers to Cedar and Tia's struggles to retain autonomy in their own lives, confronting the restrictions forced upon them by crumpling society.

Conclusion

The Water Cure and *Future Home of the Living God* serve as a mirror to pressing social and political issues around the world as they are written during a time of social upheaval. On the one hand, Sophie Mackintosh brilliantly puts the traumatic experiences of women who suffer in an isolated situation. On the other, Louise Erdrich's depiction of a totalitarian government in the USA where women's reproduction rights have been snatched away reflects how the use of power can destroy one's freedom. By using dystopian narratives in the novels, these writers not only critique the uses of political power to terminate individual rights but also raise concerns about the devastating situation of women all over the world. The writers weave powerful narratives while exploring themes such as autonomy, survival, and identity in a world full of oppression and regressive society which is a reflection of the real society where the condition of women is vulnerable.

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Bio-note

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