

The White Future: Invisibilization of Race in the Dystopian Classics, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Prarthana Dewan

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Applied Sciences and Humanities

Panipat Institute of Engineering and Technology (Autonomous)

Abstract

The prominence of dystopian literature has increased since the early twentieth century because of the need to critique the contemporary social and political issues that disturbingly mirror the authoritarian regimes contained within the pages of dystopian fiction. However, racial tensions- an ever-significant issue that faces our world-are often invisibilized except in works by contemporary BIPOC authors like London Shah and Marie Lu, to offer a monochromatic view of the future where race hasn't survived. Therefore, this research paper investigates the erasure of race in the science fiction narratives, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. While Atwood's text portrays women's bodies as signposts of regulation in the Republic of Gilead, Ishiguro indulges in a complex discussion about the humanity of clones under the authoritarian regime of Hailsham. However, neither of these portrayals sees the invisible injustice, which lies in 'white-washing' (dystopian narratives' erasure of a coloured past by eliminating textual moments that would allow readers to interrogate racial biases). I further argue using theorists from the field of race studies that the removal of material conditions of race results in a 'racism without race,' which highlights its peripheral nature within these texts.

Keywords: Dystopia, Totalitarianism, Racial Tensions, Monochromatic Future, White-Washing

INTRODUCTION

Holding up a critical mirror to the present...is a necessary precursor to developing and pursuing alternatives.

-Ruth Levitas

The need to highlight the adverse circumstances of the contemporary society is what led to the creation of dystopic universes in the early 20th century, starting with Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Tom Moylan accurately details the backdrop against which these heterogenous classics were created, "...state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt...buying and selling of everyday life (2)."

The unprecedented scholarly interest in these eclectic fields of science fiction and dystopian studies stems from the non-ideal cultural imaginaries contained within the pages of these critical dystopias, which disturbingly mirror the contemporary rise in supremacist states worldwide. The aberrations of the present socio-political scenario are blatantly critiqued by portraying their horrendous consequences in a bleak future. These texts investigate the state

as a patriarchal edifice that seizes power through the bodies of its subjects, and alters the discourses of humanity, justice, liberty, memory, and gender (Tomc 83).

Recently, the discourses of memory and femininity have been gaining critical ground within science fiction. This engagement with visionary and progressive themes, however, is in opposition to the genre's glaring omission of all racial discourse. Racial tensions- an ever-significant issue that faces our world-are often invisibilized to offer a post-racial future where ethnicities haven't survived. Therefore, this research project investigates the erasure of race in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (NLMG) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (HT).

While Atwood's text introduces speculative elements to imagine a phallogentric, totalitarian society that regiments women's bodies, Ishiguro engages in an ethical discussion about the humanity and identity of clones under the authoritarian regime of Hailsham, but neither of these accounts sees the invisible injustice, which lies in a future that privileges the dominant race.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore the post-racial aesthetic of HT and NLMG, this project uses textual analysis as a research method. This qualitative method allows a systematic study of narratives' absolute disavowal of engagement with histories of racial violence. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of several race studies academicians, I have explored the pervasiveness of this sanitization, which is invisibilized by the surface issues of patriarchy and autocracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prominent scholars of the science fiction genre, like Lucia Opreanu in "Remembrance versus Reinvention" and K.A. Baran in "The Past, Memory and Trauma" discuss how characters' memories of their past life serve as forms of resistance against totalitarian regimes' oppression while Fran Desmet and Elizaeth Mahoney examine the turning of women's bodies into signposts of persecution in dystopic visions. Compared to this opus of critical analyses on feminist and individual and collective memory considerations, studies that delve into ethnic suppression and invisibilization have been very limited.

Tom Moylan argues that a substantial body of science fiction "feeds the ideological processes that reproduce...the hegemonic order itself" (32). Mary Couzelis does analyse this hegemonic reproduction and the trivialization of ethnic suppression, but only factors in contemporary young adult dystopias like *The Giver* and *Uglies*. She does, however, insist that

Uglies makes several references to race, having been published in the same year as NLMG, for instance, there are several mentions of characters' skin colour with Shay being "olive-skinned" (30). In stark contrast, there is a complete invisibilization of colour in Ishiguro and Atwood, except in the case of the "muffled" (73) Nigerian caretaker George and the brown Martha, Rita, to whom the narrative grants just enough room to "grunt" or "sigh," (48) let alone speak.

George and Rita are the only two people of colour in these texts, and occupy liminal positions with respect to the central storyline, with George being a measly warden at Hailsham and Rita being a "dumpy" (25) Martha- domestic women servants at the bottom of the food-chain in Gilead. This marginalization can be understood in terms of Isiah Lavender's

theorization that race is socially constructed in a way that demands the “dialectic of superior/inferior relationships designed to promote the domination of one group over another” (45). This injustice recalls the historical ways in which the non-white subject has been excluded from all dominant positions and perspectives.

Josie Gill espouses the view that this lack of “overt racial content” is intended as a strategy for the elimination of whiteness in the narrative (848). However, while the novels critique the authoritarian nightmares of Gilead and Hailsham for erasing desire, intimacy, humanity, choice and individuality, there is no emphasis on the elimination of racial elements. Shannon Sullivan terms this as a kind of colour-blindness (a lack of reference to any race), which has the counterintuitive effect of fuelling white domination and creating sites of white privilege rather than eliminating racism (191).

These sites of white privilege become literal “blank white spaces” (57) in Ishiguro’s and Atwood’s imaginaries. They present a vision of a monochromatic future: *In NLMG*, the protagonist Kathy’s mention of “white rooms” (7), “white bunker” (16), and “white prefab

buildings” (101) while in *HT*, the protagonist Offred’s reference to “white tunnels” (22), “white canopy” (89), “white curtains” (96) and over 120 mentions of white objects and spaces indicates that no cultural imaginings of any colour other than the pale are possible.

Additionally, Kathy’s description of other people reveals a blatant disregard of their ethnicity: Madame is a “tall, narrow woman with short hair” (32), Miss Emily “wasn’t especially tall” (39), and Rodney’s hair were “tied back in a ponytail” (139). Along similar lines, Offred makes no comment about people’s racial identities (other than a nonchalant mention of Rita’s “brown” skin), and only focuses on their wear: the Commander’s “stupid uniform” (91), a prostitute’s “crocheted affair” (217), and men wearing “long dresses” (231).

This lack of examination of racial identities leads to, as Valerie Babb stresses, a reproduction of whiteness (177). It is texts like Atwood’s and Ishiguro’s that deepen cultural stratification by leaving ideologies of whiteness unquestioned. This idea has been investigated by Sarah Townsend, who conceptualizes it terms of the ‘white norm’ i.e. how the dominant aesthetic in dystopias is white (2). Townsend’s ‘white norm’ can be read in terms of Atwood’s Gilead and Ishiguro’s Hailsham being premised on a cultural sameness, a normative idea of white, middle-class culture that obliterates all multiculturalism.

The homogeneity of experience produced is also witnessed in *The Giver* where people live in literal homogeneity, in a society called ‘Sameness.’ Though the protagonist Jonas initially believes that everybody made “the choice to go to Sameness,” (7) he comes to realize that with everything being the same, representative of white hegemony, “there aren’t any choices” (82). Jonas’ recognition of this enforced sameness serves as a moment of resistance in *The Giver* that challenges a singular, homogenous white society. However, the narratives of *HT* and *NLMG* disavow all racial history to avoid an engagement with textual instances that offer resistance to white hegemony.

Tom Moylan studies this post-racial aesthetic using the framework of ‘white-washing’: science and dystopic fiction’s erasure of a coloured past by eliminating and trivializing all textual moments that would allow readers to interrogate racial biases (17). This is observed the characters’ inability to recognize the historical precedent of the “Underground Femaleroad” (258) in Atwood’s text. Neither in the novel nor in its Hulu adaptation does the

reader find any character drawing a parallel with the historic Underground Railroad, which was used by the abolitionists to help slaves escape to Canada and the North. Atwood chooses to sideline this parallel to avoid undercutting her feminist portrayal of white women's suffering.

This exclusion leads to a sidelining of America's racialized as well as feminist past since Harriet Tubman- *an African-American woman*- was the Railroad's most famous conductor. *NLMG* indulges in a similar white-washing. Kathy, in her reading of *Daniel Deronda* (an adopted young man who discovers his Jewish ancestry), makes no reference to his race, and simply comments that she hadn't been "enjoying it (the book) very much." Raffaella Baccolini warns that the erasure of an ethnic and multiple past produces "a sanitized version of history...and foreclose(s) the possibility for change" (15).

This sanitization prefigures the dangerous possibility that the readers, like Kathy, might also choose to leave their own biases regards to racial events unexamined. With respect to the critics and academicians, the supremely white aesthetic of the novels forces many of them to delve deep to find racial anxieties and draw culturally inappropriate parallels between people of colour and the Handmaids and clones. Gill uses Paul Finkleman's theorization, that slavery found its justification in the dehumanization of slaves, to insist that the clones are commodified in a similar manner, which justifies their treatment as organ banks in the eyes of the authoritarian regime (850).

Identical is Paul Moffett's misplaced equivalence between the experience of Handmaids as the property of the Commanders (Of-Fred and Of-Glen) and the exploitation of non-white workers who are often reduced to labouring bodies (162). Moffett further insists that Atwood offers racial implications in 'Historical Notes' section of her work via professor Pieixoto's statement that "racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did" (276). However, this mere acknowledgement of racial anxiety at the end of the narrative seems a blasé addition rather than an exhaustively explored issue.

There are several moments in the narratives where the opportunity to explore racial ramifications of certain incidents and events is thieved from the readers. Barbara Perry's conceptualization of racial purity explains that Gilead is not simply a patriarchal regime, but is a Christian, theocratic stronghold that creates a rhetoric of "Caucasian birth rates" plummeting to remove all non-whites from positions of power. However, the readers are robbed of the opportunity to engage with this myth of white extinction anxiety because Pieixoto continues with his topic of primary interest (discussion of Gilead's regulation of women's autonomy) after his passing remark about race.

A similar opportunity of racial exploration is snatched from under the reader in *NLMG* as the novel undercuts the very idea of why a cloning project is necessary: for the continuation of the white race. Just as "sterility" is a banned word in Gilead and the topic of clones' humanity, a banned subject in Hailsham, visibilization of racial tensions seems a taboo as well. This active avoidance to deal with racial implications results in, as David Theo Goldberg highlights, a kind of "racism without race" (23). Whiteness is made visible in both Atwood's and Ishiguro's texts because the attempt to invisibilize colour simply serves to emphasize its material existence.

When aunt Lydia asserts to the Handmaids that they “are being given freedom from” (28) assault and abuse, she veils the fact that this is not a freedom from, but an erasure of all choice, hope, happiness and most importantly, racial identity. Therefore, this research project stresses the need to examine this erasure of ethnicities in detail so that the unrelatable “brown” Rita and the “big Nigerian” caretaker George can cast an unflinching, exacting, and destabilizing eye on the very fiction in which they are embedded. These figures are “vanishing points” who “make invisibility itself visible” via their very being; they are individuals whose presence has been effaced and written out of the record (Slaughter 211).

This oppositional record-keeping helps in resisting the autocratic regime’s as well as the narrative’s erasure of links to a coloured and racial past. The construction of personal and collective racial archives resists political oppression in science-fiction texts that attempt to obliterate a racialized past in favour of a ‘pale’ or white future. By probing this silence surrounding racial issues in science fiction, this research seeks to stimulate a critical conversation about the genre’s potential for inclusive storytelling and its responsibility to reflect the complexities of our multicultural world.

Channelling this genre’s propensity for social commentary in the direction of inclusivity and representation can open avenues hitherto unexplored, so that both the future and the past are rendered ‘un-pale’ in public memory. Racial prejudice is, in the words of Maya Angelou, “a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible” (218). It is time that it is, in the realm of science and dystopic fiction, rendered *visible*.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: Emblem, 2014.
- Babb, Valerie. *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Baccolini, Raffaella. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Baran, K.A. "The Past, Memory and Trauma in Young Adult Dystopian Writing." *Canadian Literature*, 1993, pp. 73-85.
- Couzelis, Mary. "The Future is Pale." *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*. New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 131-144.
- Desmet, Fran. *Female Perspectives in the Dystopian Novel*. Belgium: Ghent University Press, 2010.
- Gill, Josie. "Written on the Face." *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2014, pp. 844-862.
- Goldberg, David Theo. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. Westerfield: Harper Perennial, 1932.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Lavendar, Isiah. *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*. Mississippi: University of Mississippi, 2014.

- Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. New York: Penguin, 2010.
- Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2000.
- Mahoney, Elizabeth. *Image and Power*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Moffett, Paul. "Erasing Race in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Teaching Dystopia, Feminism and Resistance Across Disciplines and Borders*, 2019, pp. 157-170.
- Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. New York: Westview Press, 2000.
- Opreanu, Lucia. "Remembrance and Reinvention: Memory as Tool of Survival and Act of Defiance in Dystopian Narratives." *University of Bucharest Review*, 2013, pp. 110-118.
- Perry, Barbara. "White Genocide: White Supremacists and the Politics of Reproduction." *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 71-91.
- Slaughter, Joseph. "Vanishing Points: When Narrative is Not Simply There." *Journal of Human Rights*, 2010, pp. 207-223.
- Sullivan, Shannon. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Tomc, Sandra. "The Missionary Position: Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature*, 2000, pp. 138-152.
- Townsend, Sarah. "'Certainly Forbidden' Subjects: Race, Migration and the Vanishing Points of Post-Imperial British Security." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2015, pp. 1-18.
- Westerfield, Scott. *Uglies*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Yevgeny, Zamyatin. *We*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1924.