Book Reviews

Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias

DUNJA M. MOHR. **Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias.** (Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, 1). McFarland & Company, 2005. 312 p.

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Often, utopias and dystopias are seen as diametric opposites—the two ideas are, as Dunja M. Mohr's title notes, "worlds apart" in most people's minds. Indeed, I have taught courses where I explained that the two concepts are as different as day and night. Yet the use of a question mark in the title *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* brings that separation into question before the book is even opened. How can two concepts so radically different be present in the same novel? Or are utopias and dystopias *truly* opposite? Perhaps, instead of day and night, utopias and dystopias need to be seen as the two sides of the same coin. Is that the "dualism" that will be discussed? And where does the idea of "transgression" (a term that makes me think of sin and other parts of my religious upbringing) fit into this study? These were just some of the questions that came to mind before I began reading Mohr's work.

Her introduction explains why dualism is a key feature of her work. She writes, "Literary criticism has notoriously distinguished between high and low culture, between the canon of the chosen few for the chosen few and its paraliterary underdog for the masses" (1). The focus on contemporary female dystopias allows Mohr to transgress (i.e. violate) the division between high and low culture by examining two science fiction series (low culture) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (high culture). In addition, Mohr states three objectives: to identify genre merges/hybrids and examine transgressions "on the formal narrative level," to investigate dualisms within her chosen dystopian texts, and to trace the transgressions "that embody the utopian narrative strands" (3). Accomplishing this third task requires Mohr to consider the concept of utopia, as well, even though her book's title suggests a focus only on dystopian texts.

For Mohr to accomplish all her stated tasks, she must explain why dualisms are so important to understanding contemporary dystopian narratives. She must also clearly select which dualisms will be discussed (and dissolved) throughout the book. These tasks are at the heart of the content of chapters one and two. In the first chapter, she gives a short history of the terms "utopia" and "dystopia" along with their myriad uses and

contradictions, before noting quite a few texts that people can read if they desire to investigate specific narrative structures inside the feminist utopian/dystopian framework. Mohr explains why *feminist* texts are her focus:

> Thematically, feminist utopias shift the focus to female reality and to everyday life; they restructure the distribution of power within society . . . They particularly emphasize gender equality, communitarian goals, decentralization, consensual decision-making, cooperation, education, and ecological issues . . . These non-aggressive, non-hierarchical, and hence classless future societies challenge patriarchy." (24)

In other words, Mohr argues that feminist utopias illustrate the possibility of worlds without the dualisms built into current hierarchical and class-based societies. She does so by setting a boundary of only considering feminist texts for her own book. Interestingly enough, though, she almost immediately transgresses her *own* boundary by detailing the field of science fiction and its history. However, this break from her goal is necessary, as science fiction has long been considered a male-oriented genre. Therefore, context is necessary to show where the transgressions inside this genre occur. This is where her study of utopian/dystopian texts truly begins.

Chapter two focuses on why boundaries matter in literature. Throughout this part of her study, Mohr makes it quite clear that the delineations between supposed opposites are what are transgressed in many feminist utopian and dystopian works. Binary thinking sets up boundaries. But science fiction literature, especially when it has utopian/dystopian themes, is "predisposed to defamiliarize us from these false dichotomous categories of thought and familiarize us with new, transgressive notions of existence. Yet . . . classical utopia and dystopia have acted within and have in fact reinforced binary opposites" (49-50). This is a place where Mohr could have easily argued for one new way of writing, a way to avoid binary thinking. Instead, she takes the path of celebrating difference and encourages "a diversity of approaches" (61) that can recognize the various lived experiences and body of knowledge that authors might have. It is a very Derridean view to take, which fits well with Mohr's overarching concept of destabilizing and deconstructing prior expectations of culture in literature.

The second part of her book breaks dualisms and performs specific transgressions that explore the possibilities of myriad futures. Her eight-novel study is a massive undertaking, especially considering that the close readings, comprising only two chapters, are each based on a different *series*—not just separate books. The *Native Tongue* trilogy by Suzette Hade Elgin is studied in the third chapter, and the four-book *Holdfast* series by Suzy McKee Charnas is the focus of the fourth chapter. Using multiple interconnected books for these two chapters increases Mohr's workload significantly. She must trace the development of characters, narratives, utopias, dystopias, feminisms, various forms (and lack) of patriarchy, and other perceptions throughout first a trilogy and then a tetralogy. Furthermore, the publications of the two series span decades, giving Elgin and Charnas time for their own views and writing styles to shift. This adds additional complications for Mohr. All this material must be summarized effectively while still holding true to the three goals Mohr stated in her introduction. For the most part, Mohr accomplishes her momentous task well, discussing each text's transgressions and dualisms in detail.

Chapter three focuses on Elgin's *Native Tongue* trilogy, which is comprised of *Native Tongue* (1984), *The Judas Rose* (1987), and *Earthsong* (1994). Mohr discusses in depth the many binaries of the trilogy, including those of humans/aliens, men/women, linguists/non-linguists, and US/USSR. Mohr notes that Elgin's narrative structure is one element that transgresses expectations, as Elgin does not use a straightforward structure. Instead, Mohr explains:

> The narrative is, in fact, full of gaps . . . The trilogy covers the dates from the winter of 2179 to the year 2289 . . . The fictional editors of the prefaces comment from an even farther, presumably more egalitarian future . . . making a unitary interpretation or reading problematic. (82)

Her reading of these texts also comes with a warning: the heterosexuality of Elgin's world is "abusive" (98), and there is no room for homosexual or cross-species relationships. Mohr argues, briefly, that this is a space where Elgin could have transgressed *sexual* borders along with the many other borders that the *Native Tongue* series does break. Yet her discussion of the trilogy does have a positive side: Mohr takes care to observe the humorous satire of *Earthsong*'s discussion and use of technology without fully understanding it, akin to our own human challenges with tech. She also points out how all three books inspire "a dynamic, open text that deconstructs dystopia as we know it," that continually encourages readers to consider their own perspectives more fully (81).

Chapter four is about the *Holdfast* tetralogy, which is made up of *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), *Motherlines* (1978), *The Furies* (1994), and *The Conqueror's Child* (1999).

Mohr celebrates how unique the series is: not only does publication of the texts span twenty-five years (from 1974 through 1999), but *Walk to the End of the World* was written from a postcolonial perspective, which was quite unusual during the 1970s. Of all the texts studied, Mohr seems most enthusiastic about this series, making close observations of how many narrators are present and why this arrangement matters. She points out that the use of a polyphonic narrative leaves plenty of room for readers of all genders to find themselves *both* represented *and* alienated, a compelling dualism for her study. This style of narration is rarely used, which adds further depth to the work Mohr is doing in this chapter.

She also details the many ways in which Charnas' *Holdfast* series moves from eschewing patriarchy in *Walk* to "a potentially utopian reconciliation" in *The Conqueror's Child* (147) before moving into a detailed description of the plot. This is the section that will most likely fascinate readers; Mohr's passion for Charnas' use of multiple transgressions (sexual, gender, and cultural) along with the worldbuilding throughout left me wanting to read those books myself. It is clear that the *Holdfast* series has had a profound impact on Mohr, and now I am left wondering if it would have a similar effect on me. Her many quotes (while necessary to make her points) leave me wanting more context and a deeper understanding of the many narrators and their varied desires.

In comparison to the above chapters, chapter five is a close reading of just one text: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This shift, though, is welcome. It allows readers to follow along more easily. Mohr, along with Tom Moylan and several others, describe

Atwood's novel as one of the last dystopias that focused on psychological survival; this transgresses multiple expectations in the world of Gilead. Mohr's study focuses on Atwood's use of the self/other dichotomy to break expectations both in understanding the novel and in the character Offred's actions (versus her internal thoughts). This, I believe, is the strongest chapter—the singular text gives Mohr far more room for analysis and detail than she had in the previous chapters. While chapters three and four did each touch on Mohr's stated goals from chapter one, chapter five has the least narrative explanation and the most exegesis even though it was the shortest. Her discussions of dualisms and multiple types of transgressions are clear and easy to follow, succinctly displaying the dystopian/utopian dichotomy found throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In the conclusion, Mohr circles back to the concept of the utopian/dystopian hybrid and then argues briefly that both the *Native Tongue* and *Holdfast* works should be considered part of this genre. While she looks at this hybrid as a new genre, I must disagree—Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and George Orwell's *1984* are just two examples of older works that are also hybrids. In all these examples, the concepts of utopia and dystopia are joined. Readers can see that many (if not all) utopias are dystopic to others, and the reverse can be said as well.

However, it is odd that Mohr does not include *The Handmaid's Tale* in this genre. While Atwood once rejected the claim that this work is science fiction, it is a clear example of a utopian/dystopian hybrid text. It is still *speculative* fiction (a term Atwood has preferred for categorizing this text), organized around the rather terrifying question of "What if things were different?" without any focus on science (current or future). The same men who keep Offred and the other handmaids in their dystopic place are the ones who enjoy utopian freedom of choice.

Mohr spends the rest of her conclusion discussing how her chosen texts "dislodge binary logic" and show "a *reality* of flux" (279, emphasis in the original). In this simple sentence, she claims the achievement of all three of her objectives simultaneously, arguing that the decidedly non-Hegelian setup of all eight books shows how much the utopian/dystopian dynamic has changed already and continues to change. The hybrid is fluid and must be recognized as such. To ignore this would be to ignore the dualistic nature of all eight books studied here.

Mohr's book is detailed and precise; she not only meets all her goals but also manages to explain exactly where her analysis is situated in the larger world of science fiction studies. However, there is one major shortcoming to the text as a whole: there are multiple places where her discussion could have—and should have—been shortened. One of these comes in the first chapter, as her literary history does not need to give as much detail about the various types of historical utopia that she does *not* discuss in later chapters. What covers multiple pages could have been a few paragraphs instead, as the minutiae here leave me feeling like she got lost in the proverbial weeds. I have similar misgivings about the second chapter. It has good definitions and explanations of boundary types and why they should be transgressed, including a short discussion of borderwalking and how it implies a nomadic way of life. Mohr returns to this concept in her fourth

chapter, as some of the women there are borderwalkers. She explains how intentionally transgressing genre borders is a way to hybridize texts, which is what led her to study the texts she chose. Nevertheless, the level of detail here is excessive.

Similar problems appear elsewhere in the book. Like in the first chapter, some of the work could have been shortened or totally left out. The section "From Critical Utopia and Dystopia to Transgressive Utopia and to Transgressive Utopian Dystopia" is a prime example of overwriting. She brings up Foucault's concept of the heterotopia here but then drops it for the rest of her work. This is quite jarring. It sets up an expectation that Foucault plays a role in the argument of the book but then fails to meet that expectation.

The first chapter is useful for someone with limited knowledge of utopias, dystopias, their differences, and their literary histories (or someone who needs a refresher course). I plan to assign parts of it for a utopian/dystopian literature class going forward. The second part of chapter two is useful for discussions of how to write transgression into science fiction texts and it also points the reader to previously-crafted transgressions in case they need examples outside of Mohr's own work.

However, chapters three and four require the audience to have read the *Native Tongue* or *Holdfast* series to fully understand the arguments. This is due partially to the density of the material covered but is also because of the extrapolation she gives on ideas like myth and religion. While these are topics covered in the novels, the concepts are not central to Mohr's purpose and therefore seem extraneous. The chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale* does not suffer from this same flaw. Thus, this chapter can aid students when confronting Atwood's novel. Like the first chapter, I plan on using this part of Mohr's study the next time I teach *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Overall, this book would be quite helpful to someone teaching or learning about utopian/dystopian literature. It is well-crafted and extremely detailed, and I am happy it is on my shelf now.

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