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Dystopian Fiction: Can it Enable us to Think Critically about Gendered Violence and Power?

*Kim McGuire*¹

Abstract

This article discusses the issues of power sex, gender, and the law with regard to identifying and controlling violence against women. It discusses these concepts within dystopian works of fiction and their application, both actual and potential, to real life. The novels and films below have been selected for their perceived relevance to the author as examples of dystopian fiction, but importantly they engage with Gadamer's concept of language and socially and historically affected consciousness. Hence, the themes, but also their reception, are products of their time and place.

The central themes of the novels will be those typical for dystopian fiction, such as power, governmental control and loss of individualism. However, other themes particularly pertinent to feminist dystopian fiction are also investigated, such as imagining a matriarchal society, misogyny and misandry, sexual violence, and the limitations upon the behaviour of individuals, usually female, but not always. Feminist theory has engaged with 'essentialism', both arguing for an essential difference between 'males' and 'females', but also disputing essentialism for limitations upon the sexes. One criticism of such works is that they are based upon biological sex and as such promote a dichotomous essentialism. However, since this article is discussing violence against women, biological or gendered, it is not engaging with the subtlety of multi-faceted 'gendered' identities, except in the stereotyping of such 'attributes'.

The selected novels have enabled different interpretations over time, due to the diversity of readers, and of social norms, values, and beliefs. Whether we can distance ourselves from our socially and historically embedded understandings through these works of fiction, to critique the contemporary world is discussed. Arguably, for Atwood the critique and change potential is not guaranteed, for: "Humanity is so adaptable. Truly amazing, what

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people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.” This article argues that, crucially, with what, and with whom, we identify, are influential in our interpretations.

Keywords

Dystopian Fiction; Violence; Women; Perception; Affiliation; Identity

Introduction

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² See Gadamer for discussion of language and historically effected consciousness: ‘My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing’. H Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Sheed and Ward, 1989), XXVIII.

change potential is not guaranteed, for: “[h]umanity is so adaptable. Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.”³ This article argues that, crucially, with what, and with whom, we identify, are influential in our interpretations.

Dystopian Fiction

Dystopian fiction often aims to critique society, as it was, as it is, or as it could be. It can also suggest ways to develop in the future. Due to the current, and indeed historical violence against women, this article focuses upon dystopian fiction and such violence. Whilst dystopian fiction in general is the opposite of utopian,⁴ the former contains many specific themes, the most prevalent being the imagining of a future cataclysmic society, characterized by oppression, dehumanisation, fear, and often government control. It has been argued that ‘...the 20th century is the ‘dystopian century’,⁵ beginning with ‘Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924) as a foundational text, (and) has continually been fuelled by the human catastrophes of the century.’⁶

Examples of the genre not only predate the 20th century, however, but have tended to focus not only upon ‘human catastrophes’ in general, but upon fiction written by males, for example H.G Wells (1895), Aldous Huxley (1932), George Orwell (1945) and Anthony Burgess (1962).⁷ Whilst these novels concentrate upon dehumanisation in many formats, this is generally seen in generic terms, and applicable to all humans: they do not specifically address issues prevalent for females. It is notable, for example, that Cojocararu specifically mentioned ‘human catastrophes’ as the fuel for much 20th century dystopian literature.

This article argues that language ‘speaks us’, that is, it shapes our identity as much as it demonstrates this. Novels focusing upon ‘being human’ may encourage one to see oneself as ‘part of humanity,’ and can be interpreted as a positive conception, one that promotes ‘human rights’ over individualism. However, such a conception can also underplay the real differences that exist between the sexes, and ignores a potential power differential. Sartre

³ M Attwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (McClelland and Stewart Houghton, 1985), 463.

⁴ It is claimed that the word *utopia* was first used in direct context by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 work *Utopia*, (Hapsburg, 1516), translated from the Latin by Ralph Robinson and Gilbert Burnet. However, the name contains some ambiguities, being derived from both the Greek words *outopos* (‘no place’), and *eutopos* (‘good place’).

⁵ L T Sargent, ‘Utopia and the Late Twentieth Century: A View from North America’, in R Schaer, G Claeys and L T Sargent (eds), *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. (OUP, 2000), 434.

⁶ D Cojocararu, D, *Violence and Dystopia: Mimesis and Sacrifice in Contemporary Western Dystopian Narratives* (Oxford University, DPhil Thesis, 2011), 5.

⁷ H G Wells, *The Time Machine* (William Heineman, 1895); Huxley, A, *Brave New World* (Vintage Classics, 1934); G Orwell, *1984 a Novel*,(Secker and Warburg, 1949); A Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Heinemann, 1962).

wrote of 'Le regard' and the effect of being both a viewer and the viewed.⁸ Feminists have extended this to focus on the term 'male gaze' and this can be equally applied to fiction that is written by males, and to viewing the world with a patriarchal lens, whatever the sex of the viewer.⁹ Hence, a patriarchal lens can include one that portrays and understands a perceived universal identity as non-problematic.

As this article discusses, one crucial difference between male authored, or male focussed dystopian fiction, and feminist fiction is that the latter focuses specifically on the female experience, particularly of being 'dehumanised' and often subject to sexual or sex specific violence, rather than a male perspective, or a generic 'humanity.' Hence, such work attempts to disrupt the 'normative' effect of the male gaze, and of work focusing upon 'human' or 'male' experience. Below focuses upon female perspectives and reveals that feminist dystopian fiction highlights the differences in experience between males and females. It reveals how males, or at least a patriarchal society generally, tend to experience 'compensation', or 'benefits' by the subjugation of females. This may explain how and why a power differential exists. As noted, Atwood argues that people can get used to all sorts of things, so long as there are benefits, at least for the powerful. Such benefits include control of female bodies, their sexuality, their reproductive lives, and autonomy. Benefits also include the promotion of specific types of 'masculinity,' which include male dominance, female weakness, and condoning violence against women. These benefits, and indeed the subsequent effects on females, are often the result of their 'dehumanisation', reducing them to mere conduits for male pleasure, procreation, or to bear witness to the promotion of a specific type of 'masculinity. However, feminist dystopian fiction can also reveal compensations or benefits for females, to the detriment of males, if alternative suggestions are enacted. The pursuit of power, and its ability to corrupt is not sex specific.

Edley and Wetherell have argued that in early sex role theories, men were depicted as 'victims of circumstance, unwitting beneficiaries of male supremacist culture.'¹⁰ Such assumptions, however, deny the existence of multiple masculinities, or indeed of individual agency. Edley and Wetherell also critique the lack of discussion of 'masculinities' in science fiction, and this article agrees that is the case, not least in dystopian fiction. However, this is not the focus of this article.

⁸ J P Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (Routledge, 1943).

⁹ M Devereaux 'Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The 'New' Aesthetics'. in P Brand and C Korsmeyer (eds.), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*. (Penn State University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ N Edley and M Wetherell, 'Masculinity, Power and Identity', in: A Mac (ed.), *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*. (Open University Press, 1996), 97-114, 105.

The 'feminist gaze' discussed below highlights the promotion of sex and gender distinctions, misogyny, sexism, and violence against women. This focus reveals, as Unni states, that if women were included in male authored novels, they ...were side-lined in science fiction as "sites of desire" until the 1980s when, after the Second Wave Feminism of the 60s and 70s, there was a brief attempt in shaping women characters as active sidekicks with a compassionate female gaze through which the suffering of the male hero "can be visualized" with compassion.¹¹ In contrast, '...representations of sexual violence in contemporary dystopian fiction written by women have been illuminating of female subjugation and gender hierarchies that were only alluded to in earlier works.'¹² Unni gives the example of Jennie Melamed's dystopian novel *Gather the Daughters* (2017), where 'young girls on an island cult are abused physically and sexually by their fathers, and Ros Anderson's *The Hierarchies* (2021), which includes the use of sex robots for pleasure.' As Unni states, both these novels deliberately move:

...from representations of women as props or sidekicks in science fiction and actively shed light on sexual violence against women. While doing so, these dystopian narratives acknowledge the political subtext of rape, an invasive act of embodied power used to maintain sexual and political hierarchies.¹³

Perhaps only in fiction can the risks be emphasised, made overt and discussed. Moreover, *The Hierarchies* utilises sex robots to highlight 'dehumanisation', or even 'what it means to be human' – typical dystopian themes. The novel revealed the distinction made between different 'classes' of females, those born, and those created. Indeed, a female identity is no guarantee of concern for all females or for feminist issues, whether in real life or in fiction. In *The Hierarchies*, the born females identify with others of similar ilk, and obtain compensations, or benefits by such identification, that the created do not. Thus, whilst 'female' is still the subjugated gender, there are hierarchies within this. Dystopian fiction thus engages with not only the reality of, or potential for, violence against women being perpetuated in many forms, but the more subtle concept of hierarchies and power. Women are capable of violence, including against other women, if not necessarily physical. In real life there is no need to be a sex robot to be dehumanised, and hierarchies within the concept 'woman' exist.¹⁴

¹¹ A Unni, 'Rape and Hope: Consolidating Identities and Hierarchies in Contemporary Feminist Dystopias' (2022) 52 (3) *SFRA Review* 136, 2.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ T Sanders, J Scoular and R Campbell, 'Sex Work, Hate Crime and the Criminal Law' (2022) 86(2) *The Journal of Criminal Law* 125.

Author Identity

As in real life, so within dystopian fiction: being a female author does not automatically guarantee that the focus will be upon violence against women. Collins, for example, in *The Hunger Games*, focused upon a totalitarian regime, and class distinctions, rather than sex, gender, or violence against women *per se*.¹⁵ Lear argues that films and novels such as the *Hunger Games*, despite having a female protagonist, tend to promote a heteronormative view of society, emphasising a lack of empowerment and diversity for females.¹⁶ Such a heteronormative view can itself promote inequalities and the continuance of patriarchal norms. The heroine, Katniss, is not exposed to sex-focussed violence, despite living in a post-apocalyptic society. The underlying themes are those of a typical 'romance', with both Katniss and Peeta surviving, marrying and bearing children. However, Katniss did kill President Coin, the potential female leader of a new totalitarian regime, seeing similarities with her style of leadership and the male tyrant. Indeed, the sex of authors or characters does not automatically guarantee an 'essentialist' and peaceful or sympathetic identity, or the converse.

Male writers can raise significant 'female gendered' issues, and the issue of heteronormativity. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Alex Garland's *28 Days Later* imagined 'disaster rape,' and, in the latter, the prospect of women being sex slaves to allegedly prevent male suicide.¹⁷ Research has suggested a higher propensity to suicide amongst males, and in many cases linked to 'masculine norms' particularly in relation to heteronormativity.¹⁸ However, women's functions are presented in this dystopian fiction as purely to 'serve' and promote a specific sexualised version of male heteronormativity. The myth of men's uncontrollable 'desire' has been identified as remaining prevalent in contemporary society, amongst many young males, and indeed to contribute to many beliefs about rape. This contrasts with research on rape as an act of violence. As Maung argues, rape is not 'sex', in the sense of consensual activity, but rather sexual assault.¹⁹ Indeed, it is an offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. However, the low conviction rate, even in peace time, reveals the low status given to such offences. In her 2021-2022 report, the Victims Commissioner for

¹⁵ S Collins, *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008).

¹⁶ C Lear, *Dystopian Cinderellas: 'I Follow Him into the Dark,'* (Central Washington University, MA Thesis, 2015), 4.

¹⁷ C McCarthy, *The Road* (Picador, 2006); A Garland, *28 Days Later* (Faber and Faber, 2002).

¹⁸ T L King, M Shields and V Sojo, 'Expressions of Masculinity and Associations with Suicidal Ideation among Young Males' (2020) 20 *BMC Psychiatry* 228.

¹⁹ H.H. Maung, 'A Dilemma in Rape Crisis and a Contribution from Philosophy' (2021) 8(1) *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 1.

England and Wales, Dame Vera Baird, revealed that ‘if you are raped in Britain today, your chances of seeing justice are slim.’²⁰

However, male authored dystopian fiction tends to emphasise sexual violence not in periods of peace, but as the result of a breakdown in societal norms. Both *The Road* and *28 Days Later* utilised a heightened risk of sexual violence when social norms and civilisation dissolve, reminiscent of ‘real life’ sexual violence in such situations.²¹ Whilst such violence exists, the context downplays the occurrence of everyday violence. Moreover, whether the intention or the result of such dystopian fiction is to raise awareness of feminist issues is debatable. It is arguable that women are often seen as supporting characters, and that violence against women is often depicted to ‘titillate’ viewers. Of course, depending upon the text, alternative views are possible. *28 Days Later*, for example, can be read as a critique of the military, and of a sexist and misogynist culture. The women are portrayed as strong characters, capable of decision making, rather than as mere objects of desire. However, the women still adhere to a masculine image of ‘hero,’ although readers may identify with these characteristics, seeing them as androgenous, non-binary or completely gender free.

Conversely, Weber discusses the filming of the violence within Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a widely accepted ‘feminist novel’, focusing upon the ritualized rapes and clitorrectomy, and argues that the text

... participates in a spectacle of violent rupture that could well be called torture porn. By this I mean that the formal and ideological components ... conspire to create a scopophilic and anticipatory pleasure in waiting for and watching characters be hurt.²²

However, Weber does argue that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is representing ‘... the abuses of the patriarchy run amok.’²³ For Weber, understanding the ‘...hyperbolic patriarchal porn of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (is illustrated by) ... the commander: “[w]e only wanted to make the world better. Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some.” Hence, this resonates with Atwood’s ‘benefits and compensations’ as indicative of the reason violence

²⁰ Baird, V, *Annual report of the Victims’ Commissioner 2021 to 2022* (2022). Available at: https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/jotwpublic-prod-storage-1cxa1dnrmkg14/uploads/sites/6/2022/06/MOJ7216_Victims-commissioner-Annual-report_AW-WEB.pdf (last accessed 20 May 2023).

²¹ A Klein, *Policy Consulting, Preventing and Responding to Sexual Violence in Disasters: a planning guide for prevention and response* (n.d). Available at: Publications_NSVRC_Guides_Sexual-Violence-in-Disasters_A-planning-guide-for-prevention-and-response.pdf (last accessed 5 February 2023).

²² B R Weber, ‘Torture Porn in Dystopic Feminism’ (2018) 11(1) *Communication, Culture and Critique* 192–194.

²³ *ibid.*

can be accepted. Ultimately, for Weber, '[p]erhaps the excesses of torture porn are the only way to shock ennui into empathy.'²⁴

One might ask, "Why do people read and watch violent fiction and what is the potential effect?" McCarthy-Jones states, 'one theory, (widely publicly supported) is that watching violence is cathartic, draining our excess aggression.'" However, actual empirical evidence to support this belief is limited.²⁵ Indeed, in contrast, a large empirical base of evidence to refute the belief exists.²⁶ The real world has been dystopian itself. Abuses of the patriarchy, and lack of empathy have existed in the not too distant past, and indeed the present. International law has theoretically prohibited rape and other forms of sexual violence against women during armed conflict for over a century, but this has not prevented atrocities occurring.²⁷

One crucial distinction between fiction and real life, is that in the former, the narrative, the events, the issues, remain in perpetuity. This undeniability of fact creates a 'truth' in itself, one that cannot be changed by any use of language or terminology. This continuance could encourage a critique of the issues portrayed. Moreover, in novels, the reader is positioned to adopt a particular position, but in real life identities are more complex. Whereas novels take a particular position, in real life, violence against women and atrocities can be accepted, condoned, or denied, according to the locus of identity of the individual. Events can be subject to changing narratives, political imperatives, revisionist interpretations denying abuses.

Japan's 'comfort women' (military sex slaves) are one of the most notorious real-life examples of women being forced *en masse* into sexual slavery. However, the Japanese government has made repeated efforts and demands to prevent memorials to the comfort women, or to remove those that exist, claiming damage to international standing.²⁸ Historically, there are far right revisionists who dispute that these women were coerced into sexual

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ S McCarthy- Jones, 'From Tarantino to Squid Game: why do so many people enjoy violence?' TCD, 28 October 2021. Available at: https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/from-tarantino-to-squid-game-why-do-so-many-people-enjoy-violence/ (last accessed 10 January 2023); D Gentile, 'Catharsis and Media Violence: A Conceptual Analysis' (2013) 3 *Societies* 491-510.

²⁶ Gentile, *ibid.*, 491.

²⁷ Articles 44 and 47 of the 1863 Lieber Code, which served as the basis for subsequent war codes, lists rape by a belligerent as a war crime punishable by death. See Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field (Lieber Code of 1863), April 24, 1863. Available at: <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/73cb71d18dc4372741256739003e6372/a25aa5871a04919bc12563cd002d65c5?OpenDocument> (last accessed 17 January 2023). Article 4 of the Annex to the 1907 Hague Convention provides a general prohibition of torture and abuses against combatants and non-combatants. Article 46 of the same Annex prescribes that '[f]amily honour and rights...must be respected,' which can be interpreted to cover rape.

²⁸ R Ushiyama, 'Comfort Women Must Fall'? Japanese Governmental Responses to 'Comfort Women' Statues around the World' (2021) 14(6) *Memory Studies* 1255-1271.

activity.²⁹ In this historical example revisionists, or deniers, may identify as Japanese citizens more than with any sex, or indeed see themselves as females of a certain class, 'immune' to such atrocities. More recently, ISIS in Iraq forced Yazidi women into sexual slavery, often supported by females of a non-Yazidi culture.³⁰ Clearly those of a non-Yazidi culture primarily identified with their own culture in opposition to another, rather than as sharing a female identity.

It is because of the complexity of identity that this article argues solutions to violence against women often fail if they promote identity purely in terms of a biological dichotomy, male v female. The next section discusses various novels suggesting matriarchal societies as the solutions, because of an assumption of an essentialist 'caring' female nature.

Matriarchal Societies

It is often argued by academics that there is a connection between rape prone societies and patriarchal societies.³¹ Such beliefs are reflected in much feminist dystopian fiction. Indeed, Sanday's (1981) classic study on rape argued for a distinction between '... matriarchal societies—symbolized as having "respect for female authority"—as rape-free societies, while "rape-prone societies were associated with interpersonal violence, male social dominance, and the subordination of women".³² Such a dichotomy is in effect not only essentialist, however, but does not engage with multiple identities, beyond 'male and female.' Indeed, much feminist dystopian fiction tends to offer matriarchal societies as the solution to the fact that females are disproportionate victims of rape and sexual violence. This has been criticised as 'essentialist', suggesting men are inherently aggressive and women inherently more peaceful.³³ Recent novels imagining a matriarchal post-apocalyptic society, portraying this as inherently peaceful are *Who Runs the World?*³⁴ and *The End of Men*.³⁵ Not only do they propose matriarchy, but

²⁹ *ibid*; E Koyama, 'The U.S. as 'Major Battleground' for 'Comfort Woman' Revisionism: The Screening of Scottsboro Girls at Central Washington University', (2015) 13(22) *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 1–5; K Nakano, 'Contemporary Political Dynamics of Japanese Nationalism' (2016) 14 (10) *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 1–12.

³⁰ J Arraf, 'ISIS Forced Them Into Sexual Slavery. Finally, They've Reunited With Their Children', *The New York Times*, 28 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/world/middleeast/yazidi-isis-slaves-children.html> (last accessed 10 January 2023).

³¹ P R Sanday, 'The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study' (1981) 37(4) *Journal of Social Issues* 5–27.

³² B McPhail, 'Feminist Framework Plus: Knitting Feminist Theories of Rape Etiology into a Comprehensive Model' (2016) 17 (3) *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 1-16, 4.

³³ A Gilarek, 'Marginalization of 'the Other': Gender Discrimination in Dystopian Visions by Feminist Science Fiction Authors' (2012) 2(2) *Text Matters* 221-238, 236.

³⁴ V Bergin, *Who Runs the World?* (Macmillan Children's Books, 2017), Chapter 2.

³⁵ C Sweeney-Baird, *The End of Men* (Doubleday Canada, 2012).

essentialise problematic masculinity, and contained the solution being viruses that targeted anyone with a Y chromosome.

An important facet of feminist dystopian fiction, in contrast to male, is that violence against women is often not confined to post-apocalyptic, or war time scenarios, reflecting reality. Hence, *After Dark* by Jayne Cowie is an important text, being set in an 'everyday' context. The novel contains many themes typical of feminist dystopian fiction, including the benefits of a matriarchal society, the essentialist and toxic nature of males, and women as victims.³⁶ Indeed, the central theme of *After Dark* is the reduction of 'masculinity' to chromosomes, to males as perpetrators of violence, and females as victims. Male violence is portrayed as innate, rather than as a form of performative masculinity. *After Dark* promotes the solution to male violence as domination by women, the imposition of a male curfew, and limitations upon male behaviour. Violence against men, not least by the curtailment of their rights, is thus normalised, defined as 'necessary', legitimate, and endorsed via the imaginary Prevention of Femicide Act 2023 and through education. The legislation was a response to a highly publicised femicide. Subsequent and universal education focused upon the physicality of males, with the assumption of innate aggression: 'I think I've made my point. Men are physically stronger than women, and that's the key thing that makes them a threat. It's not their fault, but that doesn't change it.'³⁷ Whilst these physical differences do exist,³⁸ and have in the past been seen as synonymous with violence against females, the reasons for such violence have also been seen as multifaceted, and not inevitable. Research has highlighted the role of social norms and the benefits that accrue to males who subscribe to a constructed form of masculinity, one that may involve violence against women.³⁹

In *After Dark*, it is women that gain benefits and compensations by the labelling of males as inherently dangerous, justifying the denial of their freedom. This role reversal does not, therefore, appear to necessarily lead to a more humane society. However, the reader is positioned to identify with the females, more than a humanitarian or human rights focus. Characters in *After Dark* express overt and covert contempt, or even hatred for males. Helen, for example, on discovering she is pregnant with a male reacts with: 'No, no, that awful 3 letter

³⁶ J Cowie, *After Dark* (Cornerstone, 2022).

³⁷ Miss Taylor, the teacher, *ibid*.

³⁸ R W Bohannon, 'Reference Values for Extremity Muscle Strength Obtained by Hand-Held Dynamometry from Adults Aged 20 to 79 Years' (1997) 78 *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* 26-3; T Abe, C F Kearns and T Fukunaga, 'Sex Differences in Whole Body Skeletal Muscle Mass Measured by Magnetic Resonance Imaging and its Distribution in Young Japanese Adults' (2003) 37 *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 436-440; A T Goetz, 'The Evolutionary Psychology of Violence' (2010) 22(1) *Psicothema* 15-21; A Sell, L S Hone and N Pound, 'The Importance of Physical Strength to Human Males' (2012) 23(1) *Human Nature* 30-44..

³⁹ D M Buss and J D Duntley 'The Evolution of Aggression', in M Schaller, J A Simpson and D T Kenrick (eds.), *Evolution and Social Psychology* (Psychology Press, 2006), 263-285.

word stayed stubbornly on the screen...BOY'. The reader immediately understands that this three letter word is not presented as value free, but as laden with innate negative possibility, justifying extinction of the subject. Abortion of male foetuses is accepted and performed with impunity in *After Dark*. This is a concern, since, in the real world, as Johansson notes 'impunity in relation to femicide has been established by the UN as a factor of '... global concern' seeing as though cases of femicide has increased worldwide.'⁴⁰

Johansson argues that femicide is the most severe expression of gender-based violence. In dystopian fiction such as *After Dark*, reader identification with the female characters, and substituting male foetuses for females, and thus legitimising androicide, (murder of males) does not remove the reality that this would also be a form of gender-based violence. However, a powerful reader identification with the protagonist may mean that such critique may not immediately arise, encouraging the acceptance of gender inequality. Contemporary real-life critique argues that 'sex selective abortion is a powerful tool by which gender inequalities are perpetuated and reproduced.'⁴¹

In public discussion of *After Dark*, at the Gender-based violence conference: Reflections on the World Envisaged in "After Dark" by Jayne Cowie, November 2022, the focus was overwhelmingly upon the curfew, and the other concerning issues regarding violence against women: the legality of the drastic measures and androgyny tended to be ignored. Most comments identified with females and violence against them, and focused upon the positive effects of the ideas in the novel, one positive being that women would not be afraid of walking to their homes alone or the danger of being attacked in isolated places. However, even if one supported this limitation, the curfew is from 7pm to 7am, and thus would not remove the violence against women occurring in the other 12 hours of the day.

The finale of *After Dark* suggests the potential for more severe measures and restrictions than a curfew on males – perhaps suggesting even a totalitarian regime, akin to Orwell's 1984. Read without critique, the novel provides a chilling view of a potential future world, based upon stereotypes and the implementation of a solution that fails to recognise the multi-faceted nature of violence against women. Yet, the novel also enables the reader to see

⁴⁰ F Johansson, *Femicide as a Form of Gender-Based Violence Against Women in International Human Rights Law Critique of Current Regulation and Suggestions for Future Development*. Master Thesis in Legal Science, Orebro Universitat, 2012). Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1635723/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (last accessed 17 December 2022). Femicide is the intentional murder of females because they are female and/or identify as female. The term was coined by Diane Russell in the 1970s to make such female murders explicit, rather than hidden under the neutral umbrella of 'homicide.'

⁴¹ D Bélanger, 'Sex Selective Abortions: Short-term and Long-term Perspectives' (2002) 10(19) *Reproductive Health Matters* 194-197.

the dangers of accepting excessive views. By its powerful role reversal, it provides insight into how abuses and violence based upon perceived sex differences can occur.

A similar theme of potential abuse of power when roles are reversed is evident in *The Power*, by Naomi Alderman.⁴² In this dystopian novel, females developed the ability to generate powerful electric shocks from their bodies. The structure is that of four narratives of females, Margot, Allie, Tunde, and Roxy, drawing the reader into their personal stories. This is a compelling strategy, and one that makes the reader identify with these characters, but detracts from the ability to be objective and critical. Whilst sympathy for their plight is commendable, this lack of detachment is important because it may lead one to accept inevitably their later actions. Such actions seek revenge, but increasingly mete violence to their rapists and upon murderers of family members, or when preventing harassment. If one is unclear how far to identify with the characters based upon sex, then a reversal of identity may help clarify – would such violence from a male protagonist, however abused, be accepted? The novel does reveal, however, how female empowerment can corrupt and lead to domination, albeit with males as the subjugated. It reveals how easily characters can lapse into violence against others, and how this can be ‘legitimated’ and accepted. Once again, there are benefits and compensations for one group to the detriment of the other. As a reader, one might initially identify with and to sympathise with the women, but this develops into unease as the violence escalates.

In conclusion, it is clear that dystopian novels focussing upon feminist issues have revealed the particularities of enduring violence against women. They do not focus upon generalised dystopian themes, but upon those that particularly affect women. By their written ‘testimony’, they tend to expose feminist issues potentially for perpetuity. This contrasts with real life expositions that can be subject to change, revision, or even denial. Feminist dystopian novels present issues in ways that appear palatable to readers and viewers albeit sometimes leading the reader to over empathise with the protagonists, to the detriment of critique of their actions. It cannot be assumed that reading or watching such fiction automatically leads to awareness raising or empathy. Whilst male authored dystopian fiction tends to reinforce a patriarchal society, even if this is detrimental to its members, feminist dystopian fiction suggests the removal of patriarchy. What the root causes of violence against women are, and how to deal with these are presented as problematic, but often take a bio-essentialist and dichotomous frame. Indeed, promoting female power and a ‘female’ nature is often suggested to be the antidote to violence against women, not least by the imposition of a matriarchal

⁴² N Alderman, *The Power* (Viking, 2016).

society. Few novels engage with Lord Acton's adages 'that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely,' and 'Absolutism is always accompanied by corruption of morality'.⁴³ No one is immune to such corruption, and our identities drive our sympathies and understandings. Perhaps the answer to a more humane society lies in a wider conception of humanity and the education and engagement of all its members, whilst addressing the reality of violence against women.

⁴³ Lord Acton, 'Lord Acton on Liberty, Power, and the Light of Conscience' Acton Institute. Available at: <https://www.acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2017/09/29/lord-acton-liberty-power-and-light-conscience> (last accessed 18 June 2024), 56.