

Bakhtin's Dialogism as a Discursive Means of Resistance against Manipulated Gendered Spaces in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003)**SELT Djihad Afaf**Department of English
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École Normal Supérieur (ENS), Oran**Abstract**

At the peak of the spatial turn, space and gender have become critical notions that have a direct influence on the social construction of nations. In this vein, Lefebvre identifies space as a physical entity that has a mental representation. He affirms that the physical space is the outcome of a set of values and experiences that reproduce society. Nevertheless, the mental space results from the power relations embedded within the physical one. The manipulation of these spaces produces a gendered one in which women are considered inferiors. This paper investigates the interplay between gender and space production along with the power relations they entail. It examines how this manipulation stimulates resistance precisely through discourse in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The research is carried out on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism as a theoretical frame, relying on a combination of analytical as well as descriptive methods. This article concludes that gendered spaces are being manipulated by religious doctrines as well as corrupt political structures that aim to relegate females to marginal spaces in favor of their male counterparts.

Keywords: Bakhtin's dialogism, gendered space, Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Introduction

Space and gender are two critical notions that have a direct influence on the social construction of nations. Gender consists of a crucial dimension as far as spatiality is concerned. One might assume that gender is about the axiomatic differentiation between men and women, whereas it is far deeper than this cursory definition. To entirely cover the various available definitions of gender, three essential components are worth tackling: physical sex, gender expression and gender identity. First, physical sex refers to "either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures" as defined Merriam Webster (n.d). The physical appearance, the shape of the body, hormones, and other physical attributes are strongly effective in making male and female distinctions. We can set as examples of contrastive traits: beard and breasts as well as a soft voice versus a harsh one. Secondly, Gender expression denotes the array of behaviors and roles that males and females play according to the social standards dictated by their background cultures, customs, and traditions. Finally, a gender identity is related to the feeling that a person has concerning their gender i.e. their own conception of their identity regardless of what their physical appearance indicates.

Indeed, these multiple views concerning gender have paved the pathway for theorists to investigate the repercussions of gender distinctions. These kinds of differentiation between males and females have also been expressed via space. In fact, gender and space have historically been overlooked, both empirically and theoretically. They share a cross-disciplinary relationship in the spatial theory as far as the concept of power is concerned. Undeniably, much ink has been spilled on the issues of gender and female subjugation in patriarchal societies. Still, less attention was directed to the production of gendered spaces wherein women are relegated to the margins. Thus, what the present paper seeks to highlight is the influential relationship between gender and space within the context of power. It also aims to elucidate how the gendered spaces are being manipulated by power and how this latter is being challenged and resisted mainly by discourse in the works of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The research is carried out in the light of the Lefebvrian notion of space production as well as Foucault's interpretation of power and power relations.

Postmodernist Views on the Deconstruction of Gender: Towards a Fluid Gender Identity

Starting from the 70s onward, when the emblem of "equality of sexes" started to foreground the majority of feminist academic spheres, essential inquiries about the notion of gender were widely raised. Perhaps the most appealing one focused on questioning the view of gender as a "social construct". This latter constitutes a theory that has been made by feminists and sociologists to investigate the distribution of gender roles among men and women. A role entails a set of expected practices and behaviors that go hand in hand with one's status. These roles are distributed according to social norms that are delineated by cultural customs. These roles' distributions are what reinforce the traditional gender distinctions. Speaking of statuses, males are embodied in fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, soldiers, workers, and family supporters. On the other hand, women are mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, housekeepers, and nursemaids. These functions are attributed to genders according to their bodily traits as well as the set of cultural beliefs, including

those of religion. If we link those gender roles to places, we spot out a kind of dichotomy that exists. This dichotomy is embodied in public versus private spaces.

The effect of these spaces that are being occupied by individuals on the basis of their gender roles is seen through their influence on their identities. In the Webster (n.d), Identity is defined as: "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" ("Identity") To put it differently, it is all that makes a person or a thing who or what they are. In a gendered context and with reference to social science, identity is referred to by Wood and Eagly (2009):

Gendered identity, like gendered roles, encompasses qualities that are regarded typical or ideal of each sex in a society. Gender identity can thus refer to descriptive gender norms defined as what is culturally usual for men and women in a society. In the descriptive sense, gender identity is the construal of oneself in terms of the culturally typical man or woman. Gender identity can also refer to injunctive or (perspective) gender roles, defined as what is culturally ideal for women and men. (p.110)

As suggested in the quote above, gender identity derives its meaning from the set of social and cultural norms that determine what a man is and what a woman is. These data are what confirm the theory of gender as being merely a "social construct", cutting the debate of questioning gender between nature and nurture.

With postmodernist views sweeping all over the spheres, nothing is fixed, sure or absolute anymore. Everything has been deconstructed, including the oppressive structures of the past. Sociologists suggest that man is moving towards forming a new kind of society, wherein old beliefs are deemed inconvenient and misleading. These postmodernist societies are marked by the human identity crisis as well as a continuous struggle for legitimization in a post-modern dystopian society. Speaking of uncertainty, what paved the way to the dubiety of postmodern age is the combination of works presented by Nietzsche who anticipated the movement in 1888 when he said: "Nihilism stands at the door" (as cited in Bloom, 2004,p.185) accompanied to his famous slogan of "Death of God" which led to another way towards doubt and uncertainty. Thus, as postmodernism constitutes the space of multiple possibilities, opinions and interpretations that rely on subjectivity and denies the existence of absolute facts and unique versions of reality, gender has also become fluid and subject to different interpretations. These different views "deconstructed" the traditional idea of gender and its division as male/female, allowing new forms of gender conceptions to emerge, such as trans-gender, transsexual, and cisgender.

3. Gender, Power and Resistance: The *Production* of a Gendered Space

Space is produced as a result of a combination of felt emotions and lived experiences of individuals. Among the various parameters that determine the way spaces are produced is gender. In order to discuss the paradigm of gendered space, we need to have a closer look at geography, namely, feminist geography, which directs paramount importance to the role of the cultural background and the social conventions in shaping and reshaping the gender structure of societies, places and consequently spaces. In this respect, McDowell and Sharp (1997) clarify the inherent role of culture and society in formulating the meaning of the gendered space by claiming that:

The spaces in which social practices occur affect the nature of those practices, who is 'in place', who is 'out of place' and even who is allowed to be there at all. But the spaces themselves, in turn, are constructed and given meaning through the social practices that define men and women as different and unequal. They reinforce power, privileges and oppression and literally keep women in their place. (p.3)

Indeed, as it is clarified in the quote above, the gendered space is produced as a result of the social conventions and practices that delineate who is allowed to occupy a certain space and who is not. In addition, gendered space, as it is identified by Lefebvre (1991) consists of the intersection of knowledge and action in the gender realm to which he ascribes political as well ideological features that contribute to the manipulations of space in the name of a state or the sovereign. Thus, what Lefebvre is trying to elicitate is the view that not only socialism is what defines a gendered space but also power and the power relations exercised within spaces. Even though Lefebvre is heavily influenced by Marxism and Marxist ideologies, he is also influenced by Michel Foucault's views on power. Just like he assumes that space is a means of production, he also believes that it is a means of control (p.35). From this claim, we deduce that the binary of gender (male/female) and the gendered space are determined by power. Foucault (1986) asseverates that: "the current epoch is perhaps above all the epoch of space" (p.22). Both stress on defining space as being a locus of hegemony.

Foucault (1978) says, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p.95). According to Foucault, power is a process predicated on a systematic network of relations that is a subject of continuous modification. It functions at all levels of society from the macroscopic level to the microscopic one. It manipulates spaces and uses them as a means of dominance. *In this context, it is worthwhile to consider how the interwoven notions of space and gender influence the process of the way power operates.* The interplay between these two substantial notions incites intense debates about the nature of the relationship between power and space production held on a gender basis. In this vein, the concept of gender has always been tightly linked to power relations as far as societal structure is concerned. Issues that are connected to conquests and ownership of space seem to appear hand in hand with the ones concerned with gender. This is actually inevitable due to the patriarchal nature of the relationship between men and women, regulated by society. In the same respect, Wrede (2015) claims, "Both gender and space, as social constructs, not only share common traits but are also used to reinforce each other" (p.12).

The paradigm of gendered space is vehemently influenced by patriarchy. This latter, has for long, been controlling the distribution of roles in spaces and has been firmly setting their borderlines. A good example of this is the separation of men and women in a way that consolidates gender stratification.* In totalitarian regimes, men tend to impose the rules of how a society should be. They maintain their superior position over women and convince people that this hegemonic trait attributed to men is a *prima facie*. The production of gendered space is commonly associated to power and power relations inscribed in the process of space production. Similarly, gendered space is identified as the one that is being produced with regard to gender, or that is "forced" to be produced. In his study, *Heterosexuality and Home: Intimacies of Space and Spaces of Touch*, Morrison (2012) argues that the spatial structure and the architecture design of the space delineate

the order of power among men and women. Drawing on Morrison's claim, the way buildings are designed sustains the powerful position of men. The architectural design of buildings splits them into two main spheres: a public and private or domestic one. Power relations dictate how roles should be distributed within them. According to the social conventions that place males above their female counterparts, women are relegated to the fringes and forced to occupy marginal spaces embodied in private/domestic ones. Workplaces are men's space however, indoors or "homes" are women's. Discussions about how power operates go further to describe the domestic space as mystic one where not only inequality is practiced but also violence.

Bakhtin's Dialogism vis-à-vis Gender: An Overview

As the controversies concerning gender continue to preside the leading controversial issues of the contemporary world, many attempts to represent this concern in TV shows, cinema and literature have reaped off their fruit. As far as gender is concerned, the idea of challenging power is of notable importance. It is legitimate to claim that gender is a term that ignites heated debates whenever it is mentioned. Speaking of gender and sexuality has often been a taboo for many conservative societies. Nevertheless, with the drastic change that the post-modern period is going through and with postmodernist rebellious ideas sweeping all over different academic spheres, gender has become boldly the core of contemporary concerns.

Drawing on the idea of power and how it is being challenged within the frame of postmodernism, one of the vivid pictures of resistance is manifested through discourse, precisely as far as novels are concerned. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian theorist and philosopher well known for his controversial theory of dialogism that celebrates plurality and diversity of thoughts and opinions expressed via language. This notion is defined as a set of "theoretical and epistemological assumptions about human action, communication and cognition" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.11).

Bakhtin's dialogism refutes the typical monologic tradition in novels. In fact, dialogism constitutes a challenging tool for resisting power because it allows the existence of multiple points of view spoken by different voices in the novel that he labels "polyphony" a term that means a multiplicity of voices inspired by music. Within dialogism, there is no unique or sole version of the truth but there are different multifaceted versions for it. In his famous essay *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics 1984*, Bakhtin's critical views about Dostoevsky's works are put forward. He presents his works as untraditional ones because of the absence of the conventional single authoritative voice of the narrator that often excludes any opposite point of view. He introduces his works as having different ideologies spoken by different characters that do not merge into the author's own ideology. For Bakhtin (1981), Dostoevsky is the father of the polyphonic novel, in the same book he defines polyphony as:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (p.51)

Indeed, as suggested in the quote mentioned above, what dialogism and polyphony offer to readers is the ability to meet different and multiple points of views none of which corresponds neither to the other nor to the authoritative opinion of the author himself. They allow a textual space of resistance through language that opens the door for multiple ideologies to be expressed in one single text taking Dostoevsky's novels as an example.

Thus, for the previously mentioned explanations of Bakhtin's Dialogism, it sounds convenient to project it on works that deal with gender issues. The binaries of gender have for long, been the interest of many postmodernist writers. Their ceaseless attempts to bring to the fore the sufferings of the subdued females and the downtrodden sexual minorities correspond to the principles of postmodernism that rejects totalities and maxims.

Reading Atwood's *The Handmaid Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* as Novels of Resistance against Gendered Space's Manipulation

Margaret Atwood successfully maintains her spot as one of the high volume writers of postmodern times. She is one of the writers whose fame and acclaim was achieved because of her solid stand against manipulations of gender divisions and inequality. Atwood contributes to representing the complexity of gender politics, allowing her voice to raise and echo as a firm feminist through most of her works. She seeks to make her feminist sympathy come in to the open. Her novels that are regarded as science fiction tales: *The Handmaid Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) are ones of her seminal works wherein her feminist views are explicitly manifested. Atwood's *The Handmaid Tale* explores issues related to gender identity and feminist struggle. It provides the reader with a gloomy futuristic vision of women's fate as aggrieved entities whose main and only role in life is reduced to child-bearers. On the other hand, *Oryx and Crake*, another dystopian novel through which Atwood's concerns of gender division are coupled with her prospective visions concerning the effects of the unethical scientific progress, namely genetic engineering.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood presents various forms of dominance practiced against females. One traditional form of imposing men's control over women is a forced sexual relationship held against the women's will. In the novel, the secret brothel club of Jezebel, a space of entertainment produced by men, shows the hypocrisy of Gileadean government that is originally a theocratic regime. This club consists a space of subduction and marginalization, a space in which women are regarded as mere sexual objects that have no right to oppose or object to men's commands. In addition, women's desires are muted. They are prevented from enjoying these kinds of relationships: "there is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lust [...] We are two-legged wombs, that's all" (Atwood, 2015, pp.211-212).

Nevertheless, this space of marginalization and dominance is being challenged by Offred. She creates her own secret space of resistance through allowing her feelings to go wild and opens up for a clandestine affair that gathers her with Nick, the household guardian. Through this relationship, Offred expresses her non-conformity to the Gileadean rules and resists its system by proving that women's lust is still perceptible. Another form of resistance through space is the one

of the “room” .Offred finds ephemeral freedom once she is in her room that she calls in the novel “mine” (Atwood, 2015, p.78). This very personal space that we might label as a private one allows Offred to embrace and preserve her identity. It consists a site of empowerment built on creating a sense of belonging.

Meanwhile, investigating gendered space's manipulation and how it is resisted in *Oryx and Crake* takes a different trajectory. The style of narration, the themes and the way Atwood presents the characters shows her commitment to her feminist stands. She introduces female characters as strong and owning some traits that are commonly attributed to men and does the inverse to her male characters. One of the forms of resistance in the novel is turning the space of pornography studios that are thought of as spaces where women are degraded to worthless sexual objects into spaces where women are showed as wild, strong and controlling. In the part where Crake, the novel's central character, asks questions about Oryx, a former actress in pornography in order to make her open up to him and share her weakness with him, she turns him down and preserves her rigidity . This is a sign of strength and empowerment especially for a woman who survived a difficult childhood in the porn industry.

Dialogism as a Means of Discursive Resistance against Gendered Manipulations in the Novels

Atwood's selected novels constitute textual spaces through which her ideologies about gender inequality and identity crisis are framed within post-apocalyptic and futuristic scenarios. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* centres upon her protagonist Offred and her struggle to regain her identity and defy the “new” society of Gilead's constrains. In the same token, Jones (1996) describes the imagined plot of the novel by saying that it is a: “reinvigorated hatred of women and the explosive growth of religious fundamentalism” (p.4). It shows the repressive spatial regulations imposed by the new state of Gilead. Indeed, through her novel Margaret Atwood presents her protagonist through a narrative style that alternates between monologic and dialogic perspectives. She introduces Offred as a non-conformist that struggles to free herself from the theocracy of the new government of Gilead. This struggle is carried out through language that is considered by Offred as a source of power and a means of resistance. Mikhail Bakhtin defines language as a “site of struggle” wherein the opposition between the monologic and dialogic or the authoritative and the subjective continually occurs. Monologic voices are described to be the controlling ones in the novel. After the decline of United States of America and its replacement by Gilead that is established on a rigid religious regime. The old “space” has been substituted by another one that is framed, enclosed and filled with distress. The Gileadean government imposed power through the manipulation of language. Since language is the most effective form of communication, it explicitly transports thoughts. Totalitarian regimes use language as rhetoric to spread their monologic views. They exclude any form of expression that opposes their ideologies because of their total awareness of the strong relationship between power, knowledge and language. In Gilead, the government uses the bible as a pretext to implant their patriarchal tendency by interpreting biblical texts in a way that fits its sexist context.

Analogously, in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood again creates a tribune for her female characters to speak up for women who are excluded from discourse. Her endeavor to attain gender equality in

discourse is shown through providing a simulated version of reality based on her firm feminist views. She creates a dialogic narrative that is based on the polyphony of voices that reinforces resilience. In real life, women who work in porn industry are regarded indecent and, as a result, rejected from society. In this respect, feminist Dworkin (1985) argues that: “women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped ...” (p.29). Nevertheless, In *Oryx and Crake*, the protagonist, Oryx that is a porn actress, is shown strong and self-confident. She resists the male monologic discourse by refusing to be a part in it.

Conclusion

The manipulation of gendered space through a sexist distribution of gender roles among men and women became a fertile ground for controversy. Since gender has always been one of the intrinsic parameters through which power operates, it is worthwhile to mention its tight relationship with space production and spatiality. Drawing on the Foucauldian ideology, the notion of power entails resistance. This latter, as far as this paper is concerned, is embodied in the constraints that patriarchy enforces on females. Resisting these shackles takes different shapes and utilizes various methods. One of these effective ways is discourse. To challenge power through discourse, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism becomes of great importance. He defines the term as a set of theoretical assumptions about human cognition.

In this article, the notion of dialogism was used in order to scrutinize Margaret Atwood's feminist inclinations in her fiction namely *The Handmaid Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* to unveil the ways through which she could overtly discuss the female subjugation that is manipulated by religious as well as political pretexts. She shows the hypocrisy of the political rhetoric through a dialogic method of narration where all the characters are allowed free textual spaces. The research's investigation was fruitful as the result obtained confirms this paper's claim that space production is being manipulated by patriarchy and resisting this manipulation is mostly held upon discourse. Furthermore, the present article opens new horizons for further research as it can be looked at from different angles especially concerning gender and spatiality and their representation in fiction.

Notes

*An appropriate example that reinforces this claim is juxtaposing workplaces with kitchens

** This was highlighted in gayron and pizzey. Within the same scope, Saegert identifies the public space as patriarchal one and describes the invention of the dichotomy of public and private as intended in order to oppress women and relegate them to the margins. Also, Elizabeth Herman claims that the design of cities is made to: “keep women confined to their traditional roles in the family as wives and mothers.”

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