Food and women's bodies in Anglophone feminist critical dystopias: from text to context following the pattern of the "hyper-materialization"

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ABSTRACT: Food is a theme of crucial importance in contemporary feminist critical dystopias, functioning as a symbol of both household hierarchization and market dynamics of production and consumption. As such, food can be a useful interpretative key to connect dystopian fiction to the state of the world outside the literary text. In order to explore this connection, I will argue that food is exploited by dystopian systems of organization through a process which I term "hyper-materialization": reducing women to their (re)productive roles through both a metaphorical and a concrete association with food, women's agency is stifled and their productivity is maximized. Following these premises, many of the potentially positive endings characterizing the genre can be framed as a recovery of food's immaterial dimensions of desire, pleasure and affection. It will be argued that these can be interpreted as the analytical way out of the dystopian novel, compelling readers to bring such resistant practices into their material and situated contexts. To demonstrate the diachronic permanence of this pattern across geographic divides, my analysis will consider *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985) along with two contemporary texts from the United Kingdom: *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land* (Rebecca Ley, 2018) and *The Water Cure* (Sophie Mackintosh, 2018).

KEY WORDS: Anglophone literature; feminist critical dystopia; 21st century; USA; United Kingdom; food; women's bodies

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE FEMINIST CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

Over the last 40 years, the explosion of the feminist critical dystopia[1] has opened up spaces for the exploitation of the social critique component of the dystopian genre as a tool to comment on gender politics and the material conditions of existence for women in various extraliterary contexts. Raffaella Baccolini even suggested that this component of feminist critique played a key role in the very birth of the genre, arguing that "the questioning of generic conventions by feminist science fiction writers appears to have contributed to the creation of a "new" genre, such as the "critical dystopia", or works of science fiction that contain both utopian and dystopian elements" (Baccolini 13). Developing hand in hand with the transformation of feminist movements after the end of the so-called second-wave, as "dystopian fiction seemed to be best suited to those decades [the 80s and the 90s]" (Baccolini 13), today's feminist critical dystopia is a widespread genre that resorts to the construction of dystopian societies as a tool to materialize some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary feminisms.[2]

This dystopian critique, distinctively material in its way of concretizing and exaggerating stereotypes and social injustices in fictional institutions, societies, and economies, has increasingly been aggregating around literary discourses regarding the materiality of women's bodies. From forced reproduction to gendered labor exploitation both inside and outside the household, the female body in dystopias has often been regarded as a locus for the exercise of both symbolic and economic power—two factors that cannot be separated. Indeed, as the relationship between genders in dystopias is often based on a biologically essentialist polarization of masculinity and femininity, we can argue that this tendency mirrors another polarization, one which is based on the economic potential of bodies according to their gender: a polarization which, significantly, reverses the course of feminist movements from the 1970s to the present day, causing women to return to their traditional, naturalized, and biologically determined role in the body-mind, nature-culture, private-public oppositions.

In this paper, I will argue that this process of gender polarization and commodification of the female body has often resorted to food as both a material and symbolic theme to reflect on the conditions of women who are literally and metaphorically consumed to ensure the material survival of the dystopia. While it will be argued that food is a fundamental and still under-analyzed theme in the

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[1] The critical dystopia, as formulated by Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) and by Raffaella Baccolini (2000), who elaborated it in a feminist sense, is a genre which appeared in the 1980s and played with pre-existing literary conventions by mixing dystopian elements with a utopian opening that is often found in the endings of the novels. For a more extensive discussion of the critical dystopia see *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003).

[2] Although they are not the focus of the present work, which aims to keep in touch with a specific geographical region and subgenre, it is important to mention here the strong apport to contemporary dystopian fiction which was given by a flourishing of increasingly important subgenres, such as Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, Latinx Futurism, Asian futurism, queer sf, sf by and about people with disabilities, and so on.

dystopian genre, it will be identified as inherently connected to the female characters of feminist critical dystopias through the aforementioned polarization of genders based on the nature-culture dichotomy, which constitutes the basis of the dystopian socio-economic construction. To this initial assumption, I will add the recognition that food is also an important symbol and textual metaphor for the process of consumption that women's bodies undergo in these narratives.

In order to explore this link, I will propose that these concrete and metaphorical food-based connections are exploited by dystopian systems of organization through a process[3] that I call "hyper-materialization". As women are reduced to their (re)productive roles through both a literal and symbolic association with food, their subjectivity comes to coincide with their commodified body, and, as a consequence, their agency is stifled and their productivity is maximized. On this basis, many of the potentially positive endings characterizing the genre of the critical dystopia can be framed as a recovery of food's immaterial dimensions of desire, pleasure and affection: it will be argued that these can constitute an analytical way out of dystopian hyper-materialization, compelling readers to bring such resistant practices into their material and situated contexts. My analysis will conclude with three case studies spanning three decades and various Anglophone areas of the European and American continents: starting with *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and concluding with two contemporary novels published in 2018 (*Sweet Fruit, Sour Land* by Rebecca Ley and *The Water Cure* by Sophie Mackintosh), I will argue that the hyper-materialization process can be found in various extraliterary contexts and, as such, is capable of engaging various readerships.

HYPER-MATERIALIZATION: THE METAPHORICAL AND SYMBOLICAL COINCIDENCE OF WOMEN'S BODIES AND FOOD

Before discussing the literary process which will be termed "hyper-materialization", it is necessary to start by contextualizing the socio-economic systems of dystopias as a key component of the genre, in order to go on to see how they specifically impact the women protagonists of feminist critical dystopias. The importance of the economic structure in dystopias was mainly stressed by two key Utopian[4] thinkers, Fredric Jameson and Darko Suvin, who both acknowledged the constitutive value of capitalist modes of production in dystopian worlds.[5] To underline the closeness between the two thinkers, we will resort to Jameson's wording of Suvin's thought:

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[3] The process which will be proposed in the present paper is by no means a fixed scheme that can be applied to all existing feminist dystopias; it is rather an analytical framework that can be used to unlock additional meanings and find connections between existing texts across spatial and diachronic divides.

[4] Following the most common terminology within Utopian studies, the use of "Utopian" with a capital U subsumes in itself any reflection that revolves around what Lyman Tower Sargent described as "The Three Faces of Utopianism", namely: Utopian literature (which includes dystopian works), Utopian traditions, and intentional communities (1994).

[5] Interestingly, this happens even in literary worlds where autocratic governments pretend to follow distributive principles: this is the case of all the three dystopias analyzed in the present paper, in which dystopian governments arguably aimed for what Baccolini, talking about the characteristics of critical dystopias, described as "the devaluation of Utopia by an official, neoliberal discourse that

> if one follows Darko Suvin, as I do, in believing Utopia to be a socio-economic sub-genre of that broader literary form [science fiction] [...] Suvin's principle of "cognitive estrangement" [...] thus posits one specific subset of this generic category specifically devoted to the imagination of alternative social and economic forms. (xiv)

Dystopias then operate by imaginative processes that were defined by Suvin with the by now renowned definition of "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 1972) and which will be later more precisely described by Jameson as processes of "world reduction or ontological attenuation" (Jameson 2005), namely processes of simplification and polarization of instances coming from the real world, such as class and gender divides, that thus emerge as intensified within the literary texts, to the point that, in Jameson's words, Utopia can be described as a "socio-economic sub-genre" of science fiction. For this reason, dystopias emerge as a genre that, more than any other, allows us to see the inner flaws of the capitalist global market we live in, which Suvin describes as "post-Fordism and (a) global commodity market" that ironically "demands to be called 'anti-utopia'". The similarity between dystopian systems and real-world capitalism is again re-asserted some lines later, when Suvin states that "capitalism co-opts all it can from dystopia [...] and pretends this is a finally realized eutopia" (Suvin 192). This critique of capitalism that can arguably be found within any example of the contemporary dystopian genre leads to the literary depiction of dystopian societies where social classes are extremely fixed and hierarchized according to what wealth they can produce and/or are allowed to consume, and where everything is on sale, even survival. Going from the economic to the social level, this determines a materialistic logic based on concrete exchanges and barters that will later be analyzed in more detail; moreover, this type of economic framework is particularly crucial when it comes to the interaction with women's bodies in feminist critical dystopias, as will be seen.

In this socio-economic framework based on extreme and cognitively estranged forms of production and consumption, where everything can be sold and bargained for—especially human survival—food can indeed be posited as a central theme. The importance of food in science fiction and speculative fiction was already addressed by Retzinger, who remarked that "food represents the whole of a culture's entangled relationship with both nature and technology" (Retzinger 383); Sargent also stressed that food in Utopian texts deserves to be the focus of more attention:

> Utopianism is the only approach that takes all of life as its purview, and where food is concerned, this means everything from production through disposal including what is produced, how it is processed, procured, and prepared, how and by whom it is served, and how what is not consumed and whatever by-products are produced in the process are dealt with. (Sargent 25)

Applying this assertion to the analysis of literary dystopias, food can therefore be useful to contextualize the individual lives of dystopian citizens within the economic framework in which they are inserted. The capitalist, materialistic—and, as we will see, materializing—system of dystopias determines the recognition of

proclaimed the end of history and celebrated simultaneously the end of radical social dreaming and the achievement of an instantaneous "utopia" of the market" (Baccolini 6-7).

food no longer as the human right that it should be, but as a marketable object like any other. Yet food is undoubtedly a special kind of object, not only because it entails the vast variety of themes that Sargent quotes, but also because it specifically represents human survival, becoming the supreme commodity that orients the entirety of the economic dystopian system. In the dystopian capitalist exchange system, that rests on a radical economic change in the conditions of production, whether on account of an environmental change or a political revolution, food and the survival it allows become the supreme tokens of exchange, capable of regulating the conditions of existence of human life itself and of conveying power or resistance to the regime. This can be interpreted as a cognitively estranged twist on Philip McMichael's statement that "capitalism itself is a food regime, insofar as its reproduction depends on the provisioning of foodstuffs necessary to the (economical) reproduction of its labor force" (McMichael 661). Therefore, food's importance for sustenance does not make it affordable and accessible, but on the contrary, it contributes to increasing its intrinsic value in the capitalist market, and thus to creating fractures between social strata and, of course, genders.

Indeed, the simplification through "reduction" and polarization of social and economic classes that the dystopia creates interestingly mirrors another dichotomy: the one between genders, which are similarly polarized and hierarchized according to biology. From a social point of view, this results in the intersection of very rigid divisions between socio-economic classes and gender roles, as Cavalcanti points out. Recovering Jameson's category of world-reduction and applying it to gender relations, she describes feminist critical dystopias as painting an "exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes, as if they were placed under a magnifying glass" (Cavalcanti 53). Similarly, Monticelli remarks that "le distopie, immaginando le conseguenze di un presente dilatato e portato all'eccesso, mettono in scena luoghi ove le donne sono ridotte a mere funzioni del maschile" (Monticelli, "Utopie" 8).[6] Indeed, dystopias transfer on the economic level the body-mind dichotomy that has always shaped the social determinism of our culture[7]; using essentialism as a social and economic determinant, dystopian power emphasizes sexual difference and uses the bodies of women to assert its power, bringing to extremes Monticelli's assertion that "if a woman has been attributed a body in the symbolic order so as to deprive her of her mind, such a body is imaginary, shaped on male parameters and, consequently, functional to patriarchal symbolism" (Monticelli, *The Politics* 11).

This intersection becomes even clearer when we analyze the economic systems of dystopia from a gendered point of view, again drawing from our reality. Indeed, feminist critical dystopias take to the extreme Susie Orbach's assumption that "while [childbearing] is the only known genetic difference between men and women, it is used as the basis on which to divide unequally women and men's labor, power, roles and expectations" (Orbach 7). This biological distinction becomes even more apparent in the very ample group of feminist critical dystopias where the socio-economic change that originates the dystopia is sparked by a scarcity of food

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[6] "dystopias, imagining the consequences of a magnified present, a present taken to excess, depict places where women are reduced to mere functions of the masculine" (my translation).

[7] For a history of the nature-culture dichotomy and how it has been interpreted from a gendered point of view, see Grosz.

and/or of children, a class of literature which even gained its own definition: "demodystopias" (Domingo 2008). Through their scarcity, food and children both are revealed as materially fundamental commodities that the dystopia needs to survive, leading to the exploitation of those who are deemed traditionally capable of providing them and taking care of them—that is, women. Channeling the fact that "in a capitalist society everyone is defined by their job […] women's work in the home falls into the service and production category [...] women are trapped in the role of an alien, yet delegated responsibility for making sure that other lives are productive" (Orbach 12), women become the facilitators of the dystopian system, exploited for their child-bearing capabilities, or in their capacity as home workers, or again as sexual objects supposed to provide pleasure to men. Yet they always do so from a place that is external to the public space of the capitalist economy, again building on the body-mind polarization that underlies the dystopian gender dichotomization. It is clear here that dystopias attribute women to the private rather than the public sphere of economic influence, following and extremizing another separation that is deeply rooted in our culture[8] and was especially criticized by the revolutionary feminism of the 1960s (Penny 56)—a separation that was aided both by early capitalism and by Marxist theory, as will later be explained in more detail. The regression operated by the political and economic dystopian system demotes women to the private sphere by both identifying and limiting their experiences with the (material) private areas of motherhood, domesticity, and body policing, as Varsam (2003) remarks when commenting on feminist critical dystopias such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Kindred* (Octavia Butler,1979) and *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, 1937).

In being forced to undertake such materialistic engagements, to which they must devote their body and their subjectivity (two factors that become one), and in light of their status of "aliens" in the economic system, notwithstanding the paramount importance of their role, women undergo what will here be termed a hyper-materialization process: their very body is commodified, and ends up taking the same status of commodity as the materiality of what they produce. Women's reduced roles in dystopias (and here I am using Jameson's definition of world-reduction as interpreted in a feminist sense by Cavalcanti, 2003) is therefore connected to the area of food. Women not only play the reduced roles of nurturers, cooks, harvesters, and child-bearers, but their identification with these roles leads to their very body being the object of consumption by the dystopia. Child-bearing and child-rearing in dystopias are then conceived as bodies reproducing bodies, materiality taking care of materiality, thus answering the same logic as the feminization of food-related tasks. Relegated by the dystopian society to the sphere of domesticity, pressed between roles of forced motherhood and caregiving deprived of true maternal affection, food becomes not only the material center of women's lives, which take place entirely in the private sphere, but it also becomes a metaphor for the consumption that the capitalist system operates on the female body. Food is for them the material means of a survival that is not a right taken for granted but is bartered to women in exchange for their labor: life and the food that enables it become bargaining chips, and through the control of food operated by

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[8] This separation emerged as early as the end of the 18th century, according to historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (in Penny 51).

the capitalist system, the dystopian regime invests the life, death and health of its citizens with its economic power.

This process takes to the extreme the famous Marxist proposition:

> [The proletariat is] a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. (Marx)

And yet the hyper-materialization of women goes beyond mere Marxist theorizations as it intersects with the forced coincidence with the private sphere which was hinted to earlier. The female exclusion from the capitalist economy that the dystopia depicts has operated since the beginning of capitalism itself: Friedrich Engels, in his *The Origin of the Family*, remarked as soon as 1884 that women were thrown out of the economic sphere with the development of private property – the factor which eventually led to the instauration of capitalism. In fact, according to Mellor (2000) and Irigaray (1985), Marxist philosophy already accepted a gendered division of labor and a recognition of the domestic role of women, giving way to a history of feminist thought that has developed against this identification[9].

In feminist critical dystopias, the equation of life to labor is brought to its extremes through this appropriation of the private sphere to which women are secluded; as class divisions overlap with gender, and as women's bodies are capitalized in addition to the products of their labor because of their biological capabilities, their hyper-materialization comes to taint women's libidinal state, their sense of agency and, finally, their identity. Interestingly, women's hyper-materialization and their consequent loss of agency and identity prevents them from understanding the vital role they have for the dystopia, therefore inhibiting rebellions and maximizing productivity, motivated only by the goal of staying alive. For this reason, food is a key theme that can help us to understand the conditions of existence for the female body in such systems: food sums up both their – forcibly – private and hyper-material lives, and metaphorizes their bodily consumption operated by the capitalist system, since, to quote Irigaray's formulation, "as commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 175).

Indeed, the three key roles that women enact in dystopias (sex companions, nurturers and child-bearers) all metaphorically bring us back to consumption operated on the female body. Interestingly, these three areas can be summed up, in a racialized context, by the "locus of confounded identities" (Spillers 65): Sapphire and Aunty, Jezebel and Mammy, consumed woman or woman who produces things to consume; the otherization of women for profit in dystopian novels follows the same dichotomic historical patterns of slavery, as noted by Varsam (2003). Forced to materially contribute to the very same regime that regulates them in exchange of the mere survival, they are therefore rendered unable to escape this bartering logic through free relationships with other bodies, and their very bodies are consumed by that same regime to which they contribute.

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[9] Ranging from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898) to the works of Silvia Federici, which we recommend here as further reading on the topic.

Indeed, the hyper-materialization of women in dystopias is deeply linked to the capitalist setting we began with. Foucault himself underlines that the repression of desire through the control of bodies has historically gone hand in hand with the "development of capitalism" coming to be part of the "history [...] of the modes of production" (Foucault 5). Such a hyper-materialization of women, aimed at depriving them of desire, renders them completely subjugated to the power of this capitalist economy. As Grosz highlights, resorting to Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), a body is both a lived reality and an object, but relationships with objects and others serve a "sense-bestowing" and a "form-giving" aim (Grosz 87); if women are made to compare themselves only with other commodities, they will never gain the agency necessary to consider themselves as subjects and to re-enter the symbolic order, and they are forced to remain Foucauldian docile bodies, deprived of desire. As pure bodies, women in dystopias are the perfect subject for a Foucauldian conceptualization of power that uses bodies as "inscriptive surfaces" (Grosz 138).

For this reason, the endings of feminist critical dystopias aim to problematize this very hierarchical dichotomy of subject and object, starting with the resemantization of some objects belonging to the material environment to which women are relegated. Indeed, the partial recovery of desire, pleasure and affection that happens at the end of these narrations constitutes the "hope to escape such a pessimistic future" (Baccolini 18) that characterizes this genre and distinguishes it from more classic dystopias: in the hyper-materialization scheme, such endings constitute an escape from the capitalist, hierarchizing bartering logic which equates bodily subjection to mere survival. If, as Irigaray says, "women without desire are transactive objects of exchange between men" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 32-33), the recovery of feminine desire and affection, whether for others or for themselves, can contribute to create the "luminous mutuality" where "this currency of alternatives and oppositions, choices and negotiations, has no value" (Irigaray, "When our lips" 70).

In this process of finding a utopian space in a hostile environment, food once again plays a vital role. If at first it is presented as an instrument of female oppression and a symbol of hyper-materialization, women can exploit the materialized and "food-centered" environment in which they are relegated by using food to their advantage. In doing so, food shows similarities to the performative capacity of bodies (Butler 1993): being so closely interrelated with the shaping of the human body, and constituting the perfect intersection of "absolute individuality and complete universality" (Simmel in Probyn 64), it must always be grounded in the specific social sphere that envelops it and bestows it with particular and different meanings according to each interaction. This happens, for example, when food is no longer recognized as a tool for mere bodily survival but is acknowledged as something that can be desired, and that can be a vehicle of bodily pleasure; moreover, this occurs when food becomes a pledge of affection, being donated without expecting anything in return, thus escaping the aforementioned logic of exchange and substituting it with the gratuitousness of affection suggested by Irigaray. Through these usages of food, the protagonists of female critical dystopias therefore suggest the revolutionary possibility of a different economy than the "masculine" one outlined by Cixous: "Giving: there you have a basic problem, which

is that masculinity is always associated – in the unconscious, which is after all what makes the whole economy function – with debt" (Cixous 48). The possibility of a truly disinterested subjectivity therefore breaks with the materialist exchange economy of the dystopia, realizing *in nuce* the ideal that Cixous reasserts with the words "to be nobody's child, to owe no one a thing" (Cixous 48). These usages of food, aimed to recover desire, pleasure and affection, are therefore potentially revolutionary, prospecting what Cixous would describe as a feminine libidinal economy: "an affective economy of abundance, waste, and uselessness" (Juncker 428), "a counter-gesture able to disrupt the calcification of certain economies of spending, retention, and appropriation" (Lawless 2017).

Our case studies will show how the development of the hyper-materialization process works in some narrative examples, demonstrating the persistence of this scheme over time and space.

CASE STUDIES

To demonstrate the permanence of this pattern across geographic and temporal divides, my analysis considers a widely acknowledged pillar of feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), along with two contemporary texts from the United Kingdom: *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land* (Rebecca Ley, 2018) and *The Water Cure* (Sophie Mackintosh, 2018).

The first novel analyzed is *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. A brief contextualization of the novel allows us to see that the pattern of hyper-materialization encountered in the novel is firmly rooted in Atwood's contemporaneity: in constructing the depersonalization of the Handmaids, Atwood was clearly inspired by the particular subject-object relationship that her contemporary society projected onto pregnant women and their children in the context of debates on abortion and reproductive technologies in the 1980s[10]. Women, reduced by such technologies to "fleshy incubators" (Bordo, 1993, 80), are described by feminist critics of the time as objects, perceived as functional to the subjectivity of the children they carry, and inserted in the capitalist system as producers of commodified eggs in the market of in-vitro fertilization (Balsamo, 1996)—and it is not by chance that the egg metaphor is one of the most pervasive food-based metaphors of the novel. Indeed, Handmaids perfectly represent this objectification: they are "containers, it's only the insides [...] that are important" (Atwood, *The Handmaid* 107). The functional and nurturing role of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is thus rooted in the real world, as characteristic of all dystopian narratives.

Going on to see how the pattern of hyper-materialization can be found within the text, it is clear that achieving the previously outlined economic and gendered hierarchy that relegates women to the private sphere is a key objective of the regime, ever since the programmatic deactivation of women's credit cards and

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[10] In a 2017 interview with *The New York Times* that has later been published as an introduction to 2017's Vintage Classics edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood provides readers with a wider contextualization regarding 1980's feminisms, quoting issues like the anti-porn campaign, safety from sexual assaults, Take Back the Night marches and pro-choice feminisms.

termination of women's job contracts that marks the beginning of Gilead. Women in Gilead are therefore pushed outside the economic sphere properly intended, but are nonetheless compelled to produce wealth through the two most important commodities of the regime: food and babies. Yet this key facilitating role provides no compensation other than their mere survival. Their biological capabilities contribute to corroborating the traditional conceptions of the female body which are exploited by the economic system: women are assigned tasks pertaining to the semantic field of nourishing and nurturing, whether in the form of food management and preparation (Marthas), or child-bearing (Handmaids), or are even consumed themselves, in the form of providers of sexual satisfaction (Jezebel women). The hyper-materialization of the women of Gilead, made to coincide with their gendered bodies, forces them to put up their bodies and the commodities they produce in exchange for the food and shelter that enables their biological survival. In the novel, therefore, food does not only become a synonym for survival, which is exchanged for the products of the female body (which ends up coinciding with the female body itself); food also becomes a synonym for the centralized power that sits at the top of the Gileadean society, which is distributed to the resources according to the way they can make themselves useful, until, once the productivity of their bodies has ceased, they are thrown away. After all, Handmaids are "seeds" (28), which need to be fertilized, with semen as well as with food, and bear fruit, the "humungous fruit" (37) of pregnancy. This is their job, and for this they receive their "daily bread", although "the problem is getting it down without choking on it" (204).

For this reason, the commodified condition of the women of Gilead is particularly evident in the novel's use of food, understood both as a concrete theme and as a semantic and metaphorical field. Food in its concreteness returns frequently in the work[11], so much so that the difference in the characters' dietary regimes helps signal their role within the regime. If, in fact, the Handmaids must stick to bland food that frustrates their ability to feel desire and pleasure, thus contributing to their hyper-materialization, the Wives, whose bodies are useless, can indulge more. However, it is important to note that the Handmaids' diet and lifestyle are designed to keep healthy only their most valuable resource, their reproductive organs, at the expense of the overall health of the body. The female body is thus dismembered and enslaved to the logic of productivity; the lack of humanity attributed to such a dismembered body is not by chance conveyed through an extensive use of food-based metaphors to describe Offred's body and perceptions. Indeed, concrete metaphors about food frequently reoccur in the novel: food is used as a way of knowing the world, one of the few ways left in such a materialistic context.

The hyper-materialization of women and their inability to exist outside of Gilead's materiality also translates into a logic of exchange that is continually evoked by Offred and that refers to the equation of food and power that the novel presents: a hyper-materialized worldview in which everything, even what seems like a gift, requires something in return, and in which the Handmaids, who constitute the lowest step of the hierarchy, are in no position to want anything. The language of envying, trading, exchanging, and bargaining, is extremely present throughout the

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[11] It is important to note here that food has always played a fundamental role in Atwood's poetics, from her debut *The Edible Woman* (1969) to the writing of an actual cookbook inspired by Canadian literature, *The CanLit Foodbook* (1987).

novel, and will disappear only in Offred and Nick's final relationship, when Offred will feel "thankful" because for the first time somebody gave her something even if "he didn't have to" (280).

For this reason, the partial recovery of subjectivity that Offred accomplishes at the end of the novel can be interpreted as passing through the recovery of what she sees as gratuitousness in her relationship with Nick: this relationship, which not by chance is initially framed as one of the novel's many transactions, is then transformed into a vehicle of pure pleasure, which entails the rediscovery not only of Offred's desire, but also of the agency necessary to fulfil it. Her sexual interactions with Nick manage to bring pleasure back into Offred's pleasureless life, turning out of her body all the capitalist meanings that the dystopia had superimposed on it, making "[Offred's] body [...] for pleasure *only*" (296, my emphasis). Such pleasure also unlocks a partial recovery and acceptance of Offred's capacity to feel desire, which is, not coincidentally, often described as a "hunger", using a food metaphor. And yet Offred's rediscovery of gratuitousness, pleasure and desire does not only invest her personal life, but also has important political implications: if the open ending of the 1985 novel does not take a position on the consequences of this final rediscovery of Offred's individuality, the sequel *The Testaments* (2019) definitively tilts the scale towards a positive interpretation of the final libidinal recovery of Offred. Since the relationship with Nick will turn out to be the primary cause of Gilead's downfall, which will be caused by Nicole, Nick and Offred's daughter, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s sequel corroborates the interpretation of this libidinal recovery as subversive and revolutionary against the hyper-materializing regime.

The same pattern that ends with the protagonists' symbolic and concrete escape from their hyper-materialization can be found in other, more recent novels. We will here analyze two British novels, both published in 2018, in which we find the same pattern of hyper-materialization, and in which the ambiguous, unresolved endings which characterize them as critical dystopias suggest a possibility of escape.

The first of these novels is Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure*, which presents a family living on an "island" in order to escape a man-spread toxicity that has taken hold of the mainland. Yet readers are never told whether men are really toxic and harmful to women, or whether it is merely a lie designed to maintain the autarchic system established on the (fake) island where the two parents, King and Mother, and their three daughters, Lia, Grace and Sky, live. An interview with the author turned out to be particularly important in this sense, as Mackintosh, while not wishing to clarify the ambiguity, resorted to the term "allegory" (Olivi 332) to describe the world of the novel, thus emphasizing the link between literary creation and the context of production that was seen to be constitutive of the entire dystopian genre.

The novel thus is framed as a failed attempt at a separatist utopia, which, just like the separatist utopias of the 1970s, run the "rischio di prospettare mondi finiti, chiusi e dunque totalizzanti"[12] (Monticelli, "Utopie" 5). Exacerbating the polarization of genders that has been seen as emanating from the economic basis of the dystopian genre, King and Mother's family recreates a strongly patriarchal system in a distinctively private and secluded domain that, by shielding the three daughters from the potential damage caused not only by men but also by the force of their

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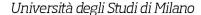[12] "risk to propose finite, closed, and therefore totalizing, worlds" (my translation).

desires and volition, frustrates and constrains them through physical tortures, the so-called "cures". Their identification with the materiality of their body is once more asserted, as these tortures achieve the goal of prostrating them both mentally and physically.

The hierarchy of the family, private and public at the same time, is already clear in the choice of their names: King for the father, the private and public authority, and Mother for the mother, who, being a woman, cannot play any public role. Indeed, the man at the top of the patriarchal structure is the one who regularly goes to the mainland they have fled to provide food for the women, thus enabling their survival and demanding obedience in return.

However here too food is not only used as a bargaining chip that serves to barter life for obedience, but is also instrumental in the physical subjugation of the girls, who, due to the unhealthy diet chosen for them by their parents, accompanied by drugs, are infantilized and kept in an eternal prepubescent state: the women eat sweet food and canned goods, while the men, described as inherently ravenous, eat meat: "men's food, forbidden" (351). Food, here, is directly responsible for the hyper-materialization of the girls, whose entire lifestyle is aimed at removing them not only from the public arena, but also and specifically to prevent them from experiencing desire and pleasure of any kind. Even affection is cautiously measured in the family and quantified according to the usual logics of exchange that constitute the basis for any relationship in dystopian systems. This is why the final escape of the girls, who run away together and find true sisterly communion among themselves, is configured as a break with King's hierarchic and dystopian system that forbade the gratuitousness of affection and unbridled emotions on the part of women.

The same vital role played by unselfish communion between women also characterizes the last novel to be examined, Rebecca Ley's *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*. The novel remains deliberately vague regarding the quality of the relationship between the protagonists Mathilde and Jaminder, alluding first to a strong friendship, then to a homoerotic relationship, and finally to co-parenting; yet an interview with the author (Olivi 2022) importantly downplayed the importance of physicality in the relationship between the two women. This detail is fundamental as it can be again interpreted as a break from the hyper-materialization pattern. Indeed, the concreteness of food and the biological capacities of women's bodies play once more a predominant role in the construction of the dystopia, where an environmental catastrophe has made food scarce, and where conceiving babies is mandatory by law. This is why the escape of the protagonists from the upper echelon of London society, where food was still abundant and could allow the survival of those who accepted its rules, can be framed as a symbolic escape from any materiality, which is reflected in their relationship. If at the beginning the hyper-materialized protagonists try to remain in London at all costs, accepting to barter their freedom for the abundance of food that allows them to eat and thus survive, at the end of the novel they run away to Scotland, where food is scarcer and where survival is not guaranteed, but where, at least, child-bearing is not mandatory. This can be interpreted as a break with the hyper-materialization of the London system, paired to the recovery of the capacity to see food no longer as something that merely allows one to survive: this is made clear by the recurrence of food-based memories (such as chocolate, 124), in which the evocation of food as an immaterial

image, as a memory, can convey connotations such as contentedness and affection, connected to a familiar sphere apparently lost, whereas food in its materiality cannot convey real pleasure, because in order to be obtained it needs a huge personal sacrifice.

The novel's ending also contributes to the recovery of these immaterial and familiar meanings excluded by dystopian hyper-materialization: Mathilde and Jaminder choose to become mothers of Jaminder's biological son, conceived through rape by an officer of the new London-based republican government. To make up for the lack of food, in fact, the government has decided to implement a forced birth policy on women hoping that this will one day result in an abundant workforce: this once again posits an equation between children and food, removing affection from the concept of motherhood. Jaminder and Mathilde's choice to become mothers together reinserts maternal affection into the hyper-materialized world and allows the protagonists to envisage an escape route from the London context in which, although they had the luxury of access to food, everything they received implied an exchange and the loss of something, whether it was their identity, their freedom, or their ability to feel. As in *The Water Cure*, the ending remains open, and there is no certainty as to whether this escape actually succeeds or results in the protagonists' death by starvation; however, as the novel closes with Jaminder's choice to risk her life in order to fetch some food for Mathilde and their son Hugo, we are left with the suggestion of the possibility of choosing something that goes beyond mere survival: the possibility of an affective existence that can constitute the basis of a new libidinal economy.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, food emerges as one of the fundamental themes of contemporary critical dystopias, both in a thematic and a symbolic sense. Furthermore, the analysis conducted has shown how food is particularly connected to the material condition of women in dystopias: by concretizing the link between individual lives and social, political, and economic systems, food becomes a concrete symbol of female existence and summarizes its economic gendered oppression. Identified with her body and the sphere of nature, and forcibly excluded from the sphere of culture, women are forced to re-produce commodities typically associated with the female body by the dystopian gender polarization. The concept of hyper-materialization has proven to be very useful in interpreting not only how women's existence is forced to coincide with the economic potential of their bodies, but also in understanding how this economic system and the episteme of exchange that derives from it impacts women's agency and identity. The endings of the works considered, therefore, can be interpreted as a partial break with this hyper-materialization, and as a recovery of the faculties of feeling desire and pleasure. In particular, it has been observed how the recovery of the capacity to create female alliances that go beyond the biological bond is as fundamental in this overcoming of the material episteme as the recovery of unproductive uses of the female body based on pleasure and affection.

This diachronic analysis of the theme of food has demonstrated its importance as a growing theme in works of recent years; the analysis of the hyper-materialization process should therefore not be limited to the three novels considered here, but could be of use to analyze further developments in the genre in other contexts. The recurrence of capitalist and hyper-materialistic worlds that tend to exploit women's bodies merits further study, and food, both as a concrete and symbolic theme, deserves to be a cornerstone of such an analysis.

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