



## Resistance and Survival in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

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Date of Submission: 12-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 27-09-2024

**ABSTRACT:** This article attempts to examine how resistance performs a major role in the dystopian novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2018) by Louise Erdrich. Raffaella Baccolini's concept of 'critical dystopia', which focuses on maintaining 'utopian impulse', has been used to analyse the text. The article examines the methods used by the characters to resist the oppressive regime. The article discusses writing and its value for the characters within the realm of authoritarian control. Further, the article studies how the writer challenges the status quo by employing the existing issues of society.

**KEYWORDS:** Resistance, dystopia, crisis, writing, survival

### I. INTRODUCTION

When a dictatorship emerges in society, no doubt it affects individuals extensively regardless of their sex and gender identity, but women often have to endure a heightened level of suffering due to gender-based discrimination and subjugation. Whether it was Adolf Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, or Mussolini's Italy, women have faced hardships and oppression including imprisonment, torture, and even death due to their sexual identity. Restrictions on education and promotion of domestic roles for women have been prominent that prevented them from enthusiastically participating in public life. The portrayal of oppressive regimes, confined roles of women, control over their bodies, and struggles for equality and liberation in dystopian literature reflects the real condition of society. Indeed, dystopia is not merely a fiction but a lived reality. What is seen in the fictional world of dystopia has already been experienced by many women worldwide. Women's situation is much worse in several countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, women's situation

is much worse than in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For instance, the protests happened recently in Iran when a woman Mahsa Amini was arrested by the 'morality police' of Iran for not wearing a headscarf in public. Later she died in custody. The freedoms and rights to live a life without any restriction are unfortunately not allowed for women in such countries even in the twenty-first century. Abortion has been made completely illegal in 24 countries according to a report of the Centre for Reproduction Rights. More than 90 million women have been deprived of rights even of their bodies (CRR). In such a situation, it becomes apparent that to achieve basic human rights, women will protest and resist those powers who have made prevention. When abortion was declared illegal in Ireland in 2018, several women came out on the street to protest against the government. The famous Handmaid's Red costume from Margaret Atwood's novel became the symbol of the protest indicating the dystopia the existing society is turning into. Women protesters dressed as handmaids wearing red cloaks and white bonnets to protest. In an interview, Margaret Atwood said, "In countries that prohibit birth control and reproductive health information, the state claims ownership of women's bodies through enforced childbearing. What the costume is asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?" (Holpuch, 2018). From the MeToo movement to protests against the abortion ban, several clashes have been seen for women's rights in the last few years and are still happening. It won't be surprising if a woman writer depicts a dystopian world by exaggerating the situation where women are forced to live under the control of somebody else because that is the reality of many women worldwide. These protests will definitely impact literary writings, especially those that come from female writers. From around the world, they have written dystopian novels that, in some way or another, reflect society's existing



condition. Women writers have dealt with several themes of everyday conflicts such as reproduction rights, abortion ban, sexual and mental harassment, infertility due to climate change, rape, and control of women's bodies.

This article is an analysis of themes and strategies of resistance in Louise Erdrich's dystopian novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017). Born in Little Falls, Minnesota, Erdrich is an American writer who has written more than 28 books of fiction and non-fiction. Her novel *The Plague of Doves* was longlisted for the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 and received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. In this article, through the analysis of the selected novel, there have been several questions addressed, including the level to which resistance becomes inevitable in dystopian narratives and how the resistance helped the characters defy those rules that try to snatch away their rights and stop them from living their life independently. Although many women writers have written dystopian fiction in contemporary times, this study is confined to Louise Erdrich's novel. Employed a wide range of themes including reproduction rights, technological surveillance and control, social inequality, marginalization, and environmental degradation, Louise Erdrich not only provides a stark critique of society but also offers poignant reflections on contemporary social and political issues. This novel follows the story of a pregnant woman Cedar who is narrating her experiences of dilemma in a diary for her unborn child. The fertility rate has gone down in the state and an emergency has been declared for unspecified reasons. All the pregnant women are detained by the state government to study their babies. Due to the decline in the fertility rate the government has taken the responsibility of all pregnant women to make safe delivery. Cedar became pregnant when the emergency was declared and she strived hard to run from the government's control. Cedar knew that once the government took her child, she would be separated from her child permanently. As she goes on the run for the protection of her unborn child, she confronts her own biological roots, identity, and the role of motherhood in an uncertain world. The novel follows the major themes that reflect societal issues such as Reproduction rights, self-identity, and the clash between science and religion.

Resistance has been a common theme in literary narratives, often propels the story forward and encourages character development or consideration of social, political, and ethical questions. From the personal act of resistance to

collective struggle and opposition to an ideology, it is evident that any form of defiance narrated in a literary setting represents a natural response of the human spirit towards oppression, injustice, and tyranny. It is a theme that permeates genres from dystopias to postcolonial novels to feminist writing of all strips to historical accounts. Dystopian fiction shares an intricate connection with resistance in many ways as the genre itself is built on the theory of resistance. The time when it emerged as a genre in literature in the early twentieth century, the world was facing severe upheavals and chaos due to world wars. During this turbulent period, utopian dreams were questioned and turned into dystopian nightmares. By portraying frightening visions of society, writers critiqued the oppressive systems that were designed to snatch individual rights. They put their efforts into raising awareness of societal dangers. *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924) and *1984* by George Orwell (1949) are the outcomes of such circumstances. Although resistance has always been a significant theme in dystopian fiction from the beginning, its representation and methods have changed over time with the fear and concerns of society. The early dystopian novels such as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *1984* by George Orwell often shaped resistance in the form of individual rebellion and emphasised isolation and experiential distress. Characters in the later dystopian novels are often depicted as powerful who subvert oppressive systems by using various skills and offering alternatives to mainstream societal edifices. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have divided dystopian fiction into two categories. One is the classical dystopia that maintains the lesser hope in their novels. The characters portrayed in this dystopia are either detained or bow down to the authority at the end, leaving no hope for the reader. *1984* by George Orwell is a classical dystopia where the protagonist Winston Smith is confronted with the raw, unadulterated power of the party and his initial dreams of rebellion soon turn to ashes, leaving an indoctrinated Winston who believes everything that 'Big Brother' has told him. The critical form of dystopia is different in terms of character development as well as in the form of resistance. They are left open-ended so that readers can interpret the text to their understanding. With the open-ended form, these texts maintain a "utopian impulse" in their works. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is considered a significant example of critical dystopia that departs from the convention of the classical form of dystopia. It is an open-ended text and offers criticism of the



ongoing social and political issues. However, the major focus is on the precarious condition of women in society and it also depicts the possible consequences of the existing situation which might be worse not only for women but for all if left ignored. This form is partially followed by writers of the twenty-first century mainly because of the “blurring borders between genres” (Donawerth, 2003). Raffaella Broccolini has explained “It is precisely the use, re-vision, and appropriation of generic fiction that constitute an oppositional writing practice and an opening for utopian elements in...dystopian fiction” (Donawerth, 2003, p. 30). A different style has also been used in critical dystopian fiction that blends it with another genre such as sex role-reversal in *The Day of the Drones* (1969) by A.M. Lightner. The intermixture of genres opens up spaces for more radical vision. The novel selected for this study comes under the category of critical dystopian fiction. The portrayal of strong female characters who know how to resist the established norms and the use of open-ended techniques by the writer makes the writing exceptional. In this narrative, resistance has been explored not only through the grand revolutionary acts but from everyday survival and solidarity.

The novel was written during a time when several social and political upheavals were happening in America. When disturbances happen in a society for any reason, the impact will be apparent in the literary narratives. The theme of reproduction and struggle for freedom in Erdrich’s novel reflects the abortion ban politics that occurred in various countries including the USA, the UK and Ireland. The depiction of a society where women are deprived of reproduction rights and forced to stay under authoritarian control critiques existing societal issues surrounding gender inequality, bodily autonomy and reproduction rights. When the established customs and norms attempt to stifle individual freedom, resistance will surely occur. Through this novel, Erdrich challenges and questions the underlying power structures that establish such customs that help to prevent women from liberty and rights.

The protagonist Cedar is represented as a strong female character who does not accept things straightforwardly. The struggle to seek the truth of her biological identity and keep writing a diary in a state where reading and writing are strictly banned makes Cedar’s character exceptional. The novel follows an epistolary structure, exchange of letters and diary entries, through which Cedar unfolds the narratives of the dystopian society she encounters.

The act of divulging emotions and feelings through writing is seen as a form of revolt as Lyotard said ‘to write is to resist’ (Flynn, 1996). Words and sentences are used as weapons to fight against coercion. This is the only source of people in a totalitarian state that works as a medium to share thoughts and communicate. Cedar and Eddy’s secret code used in the letter to share the plan of escape illustrates the importance of writing. Eddy, her step-father wrote a letter in which the eighteenth word of each sentence marks a code word and with this, she gets to know the plan. Cedar also issues her column in *Zeal* magazine where she expresses her experiences with the readers and courageously shares the news of her pregnancy. She wrote “I have news that may upset some of you, but I think it only right to forward and say that I am pregnant, and that so far the pregnancy has gone well in spite of the relentless persecution that I have suffered along with every other pregnant woman in this time” (Erdrich, 2017, p. 259). Her courage to speak against the oppression inspires readers to take action against the oppression. Cedar’s notebook in which her story is narrated becomes a method to remain connected to her unborn child as she mentions “This notebook has become my life, or perhaps better to say that this notebook has become the way I remain connected with my life, and with you” (Erdrich, 2017, p. 216). Through her writing, she is able to express her love and care for her child and maintains a ‘utopian impulse’ for the future to remain connected even when the forces seek to separate them. She ensures her existence by writing about her experiences of persecution with the hope that one day her child will know the truth of his/her origin and the struggles the mother faced. This act of confrontation is a testament to Cedar’s determination to assert her identity and preserve her history. Nevertheless, it would be apt to mention that writing has become an invaluable source of survival in a world of crisis.

Along with silent resistance, physical resistance is another method used in the novel. When Cedar was captured and detained in the hospital, in order to escape from the hospital, she made several secret connections and tried to find out the way to escape. Tia, her room partner, prepared a rope by unwinding the threads of the blanket. This rope unfortunately grabbed the attention of one of the nurses. Tia and Cedar, to retain the last chance of escape, killed the nurse and hid her in the cupboard. When the resistance becomes cardinal, even act of violence seems apparent. The killing of the nurse emphasises the



amount to which the resistance can lead if forces are used to destroy one's freedom. Violence and unrest are a natural phenomenon in any dystopian society whether it comes from those who preserve the power or from those who are subjugated.

*Future Home of the Living God* by Louise Erdrich is a significant example of critical dystopia that maintains the hope for a change in society. Written from the perception of a pregnant woman who is persecuted, this novel gives voice to those who are suppressed and subjugated due to societal norms. This is a resistance to those customs that are used to strip away individual rights. The novel is an answer to those who politicise the issues of reproduction through abortion ban policies because this is not the concern of the government whether the child should be raised or not, but up to women. After all, it is their body. Further, Erdrich also addresses the matters of self-identity. Cedar's longing for the truth of her biological identity stresses the importance of individuality one should have. Along with self-identity, this novel offered the importance of writing. It has played a major role in providing strength to characters and reason for survival.

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