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BOOK REVIEW: Susan Watkins. *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 220p. ISBN 978-1-137-48649-3

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Professor of Women's Writing at the School of Cultural Studies and Humanities, and Director of the Centre for Culture and the Arts at Leeds Beckett University, UK, Susan Watkins is an expert in feminist theory, as well as in contemporary women's utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic fiction. Having written extensively on the works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Penelope Lively and others, focusing on themes such as feminine subjectivity, mother-daughter relations, exile and nostalgia, nation and identity, time and narrative, memory, aging and gender, Susan Watkins published in the year 2020 this comprehensive study entitled *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*, a work somehow anticipated by her article of May 12, 2012, "Future Shock: Rewriting the Apocalypse in Contemporary Women's Fiction".

The volume under review here auspiciously opens Palgrave Macmillan's new monograph series dedicated to late twentieth and twenty-first century works authored by women, non-binary and trans literary critics and cultural theorists, and, as its author states in the Acknowledgements section, it was enriched by pivotal ideas and helpful comments offered at various conferences by Mary Eagleton, Clare Hanson, Alice Ridout, and other members of the Contemporary Women's Writing Association.

Susan Watkins's most recently published book is divided into seven thematically-structured chapters, beginning with an introduction – "Rewriting and Transforming Traditions" – and ending with a concluding section entitled "The Post-secular". The five mid-chapters bear rather transparent titles: "Science, Nature and Matter", "The Posthuman Body", "The Maternal Imaginary", "Time, Narrative and History", and "Literature and the Word". What these titles do not reveal, however, is the wide array of fictional and theoretical works featured therein, the

result of a careful selection process, which ultimately yielded impressive results, giving the required coherence to the theoretical discourse and the necessary cohesion to the critical analysis of each literary text that the author dwells upon.

The introductory part focuses on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's world-renowned 1985 dystopia, and on *Dawn*, Octavia Butler's 1987 novel which, together with *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989), later became the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, republished since 2000 under the title *Lilith's Brood*. Susan Watkins astutely juxtaposes these two works, published merely two years apart, in order to emphasise that the ways in which the future is imagined are heavily informed by the states of affairs current at the time when the writing process takes place. On the one hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a sample of what Andrea Domingo called a "demodystopia", as the Republic of Gilead seems a conceivable outcome of any theocratic government, given that through religious-fundamentalist lenses women are seen as incubators in need of strict regulation. On the other hand, *Dawn* is a skilful example of what Susan Watkins ingeniously termed "feminocentric Afrofuturism", since it focuses on colonisation, interspecies hybridisation, eugenicism, racial identity, gender and sexuality, in a context marked by dichotomies such as captor versus captive, oppressor versus oppressed, master versus slave, control versus consent, forceful submission versus mental conditioning.

In the second chapter, after legitimately pointing out the increasingly obvious patriarchal influences on conventional Western science and technology, the author unreservedly upholds the vital reconnection of these two fields of inquiry with the humanities and with feminist studies through a journey featuring Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Stacy Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000) and Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007). Watkins duteously draws attention to the dangers lurking in the conservative reliance on gendered definitions of nature as inherently feminine, through an in-depth analysis of Sara Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and Jane Roger's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011). These novels describe worlds where the techno-scientific establishment views animals, children and women as merely "matter", important only to the extent that they can contribute to a better functioning of the new foetal maternal apparatus meant to prevent population decline or overpopulation, as the case may be. Given the continued failure of such corporate attempts, the post-apocalyptic return of women to traditionally assigned gender roles is construed as abortive, the only hope of survival lying in the abandonment of self-destructive anthropocentrism, followed by the urgent rearing of an intra-

active harmonious existence of plant, animal, human and machine species, achieved by assuming shared responsibility and by ensuring rightful accountability.

In line with the theoretical examination of the ways in which the above-mentioned novels mirror the relationships between bodies' materiality and discursive practices, the third chapter shows how humanity's relation to non-human entities, be they organic or inorganic, natural or artificial, needs to be cleansed of anthropocentric biases, and reshaped so as to harbour a more holistic understanding of the universe. Relying on Donna Haraway's cyborg figurations, on Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethical theory and on Robin Fox's symbiogenesis, Susan Watkins deftly scrutinizes various body-reconfiguration techniques, from the Crakers – animal-human hybrids able to read and write – in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), or the symbiogenetic kinship between plant life and technology illustrated in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Shadow Speaker* (2007), to Spike – the Robo Sapiens passionate about reading poetry, capable of falling in love, and willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of others – in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007).

This last-mentioned novel, together with Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), Julie Myerson's *Then* (2011), and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017), is also analysed in the fourth chapter, which exposes the effects of post-apocalyptic environments on women's interactions in general and on mother-daughter relations in particular. Susan Watkins expertly relies on these writings to clearly demonstrate how the traditionally drawn vicious circle of environmental conquest, exploitation and destruction – typecast in male-authored works of apocalyptic fiction – can be broken, through occasionally comic non-linear narratives where woman-centred love relationships, whether romantic or maternal, are skilfully used to allow both characters and readers to spiral out of the circular dreariness of traumatic haunting.

The fifth chapter is constituted by the analysis of texts that reflect creative revisions of the interrelations between gender and history. These are sequels such as Doris Lessing's 'Ifrik' novels – *Mara and Dann* (1999) and *General Dann* (2005) –, Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004), Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013). Watkins pertinently argues that the sequel constitutes the perfect device to imaginatively challenge conventional views of time, narrative, gender and history, occasioning more hopeful alternative post-apocalyptic outcomes, since it generates a suspension of tragic inevitability, induces the proliferation of multiple time-spaces, and builds on the lack of immediate closure characteristic of a work-in-process.

Acknowledging the staunch presence, in the works of female authors, of words, texts and narratives among the things that have survived the apocalypse, and drawing on Adrienne

Rich's views of writing as "re-vision" and on Jaques Derrida's 1984 study "No Apocalypse, Not Now", Watkins focuses in the sixth chapter on Doris Lessing's *General Dann* (2005), Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010), Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles: A Family 2029-2047* (2016), in order to highlight that the urge to safeguard archives of times past ultimately materialises into palimpsests, bound not simply to preserve meaning after the end, but rather to recalibrate and transfigure it.

The concluding section aptly places two novels by Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and one by Nicola Barker, namely *H(A)PPY* (2017), at the centre of an investigation regarding the influence of post-apocalyptic writings on newly emergent forms of spirituality and the role of such texts in what Rosi Braidotti called the "post-secular turn", which resulted from the recent hijacking of secular humanism by populist xenophobic European politicians. This post-secular turn need not necessarily steer us towards newly-devised systems of religious belief, Watkins seems to imply, as she sensibly counters Brooks Bouson's claims that Margaret Atwood might advocate, in her works, the existence of an innate human drive towards worshipping the supernatural, one that is inevitable and inescapable. Since the pre-apocalyptic stage depicted in many of the novels analysed in this book was marred by some form of fundamentalism, the need for a differently structured belief system is readily apparent and felicitously matched by spirituality rather than religion, or by plural faith narratives, whose syncretism fosters not only freedom of religion, but also a much coveted freedom from religion.

Susan Watkins's book masterfully showcases expertly performed analyses of post-apocalyptic fiction written by women authors and beautifully demonstrates how these works have broadly innovated the genre. By switching from the singular, phallogocentric, inflexible, tragic perspective based on a fundamentalist judgement reliant on guilt and punishment, which male authors prefer, to a plural, hybrid, even comic framework based on the acceptance of fallibility, female writers have been nurturing the creation of pluralistic faith spaces and embracing post-secular spirituality. Whilst the ways in which men envision apocalyptic scenarios betray a conspicuous nostalgia for the state of the world as-it-used-to-be, women display a post-apocalyptic imaginary that allows for a reconstruction of the world no longer modelled on conservative, patriarchal, neo-colonialist ideas, but fuelled, instead, by hopes for better and brighter possible outlines of posthuman existence.

References

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