

The Feminist Dystopia: A Literary (Sub)genre?

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether or not feminist dystopian fiction can be seen as a distinct literary (sub)genre. It considers the importance of looking at both internal features of texts and at recognition by the field with regard to the emergence of (new) (sub)genres. Chapter one will focus on theory on genre, for which Claire Squires' *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007) is of particular importance, as her work discusses both these aspects with regard to genre and simultaneously focuses on the significance of genre to the marketplace. Chapter two will focus on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as this novel has been analysed as a feminist dystopia and is nowadays often used as touchstone for contemporary works regarded as similar to it – demonstrating its significance to this thesis. Chapter three will focus on the internal features through an analysis of both *The Handmaid's Tale* and the four novels of which my corpus is composed, which are Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* (2017), Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007). Chapter four shows how the field has dealt with these works and whether or not the feminist dystopia is used and acknowledged as a generic label. This thesis establishes that Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a narrative that remains of relevance in that it can be applied to different times and contexts and it continues to be of interest to both academics, television producers, and critics. Atwood's work and the four novels of which my corpus is composed all present narratives that can be labelled as feminist dystopian fiction, which is concluded on the basis of a shared set of internal features. These features are often pointed out by critics (and sometimes also by publishers), but feminist dystopian fiction is not (yet) entirely recognised as a distinct literary (sub)genre.

Keywords: literary field, feminist fiction, dystopian fiction, feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, contemporary fiction, *Gather the Daughters*, *The Power*, *The Carhullan Army*, *Future Home of the Living God*.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Theoretical Framework	4
Chapter Two: <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	10
The reception in the 1980s	11
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> now	12
Academic attention	15
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> and genre.....	18
Chapter Three: Internal Features	21
Dystopian features	21
Feminist features	25
Genre	29
Chapter four: Recognition by the Field.....	31
Critics	31
Publishers	38
Conclusion.....	43
Appendix A	46
Works Cited.....	49

Introduction

“Feminist dystopias, long established in a shady nook of the publishing industry, are now out there shaping the zeitgeist” (Thorpe).

Vanessa Thorpe is an arts and media correspondent who wrote an article for *The Observer* in which she argues that the feminist dystopia is no longer a minor insignificant branch of fiction but has actually become a fully-fledged genre that should be taken more seriously by the literary field – or at least by professional critics. The article intrigued me and as I was looking for articles or book reviews comparable to the one by Thorpe I noticed that *The Handmaid's Tale* is often mentioned by critics as a sort of touchstone for contemporary novels that present a similar type of fiction. Why *The Handmaid's Tale*? Is it because this novel presents a type of fiction that has no suitable generic label yet? I am not unfamiliar with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as it has been reappearing in classes on literature that I followed throughout my Bachelor and Master and it has, most importantly, also been analysed as a feminist dystopia. On the basis of this set of observations I chose to research whether or not the feminist dystopia could be considered to be a genre and if so, what it would comprise and what the role of *The Handmaid's Tale* is. I came up with the following research question: can we speak of feminist dystopian fiction as a distinct literary (sub)genre?

I selected four novels, namely Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, and Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters*. The only selection criteria I had was that each of the novels had to have been compared to *The Handmaid's Tale* by a professional critic at least once, as I believe *The Handmaid's Tale* plays an important role concerning this particular group of fiction. I took four novels because the scope of this thesis requires me to do so, as I will also provide a close analysis of these novels and do not have unlimited time and an unlimited amount of words to use. These novels were selected as I was soon able to establish that they have been linked to *The Handmaid's Tale* by many critics and thus met my requirements. While no academic attention has been paid to whether or not we can speak of the (sub)genre feminist dystopian fiction, neither has any academic attention been paid to any of these novels. This means that there are no academics who have analysed them and also none who have labelled them as feminist dystopian works.

I will begin my thesis by establishing my theoretical framework, which will be based on theory on genre. One of my main sources is Claire Squires' *Marketing Literature: The*

Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain (2007), as this gives clear insights into how genre works in the literary field and what its importance is in and to the marketplace. Also, Squires clearly displays the importance of both internal features and recognition by the field, which are the two main aspects I will focus on. Chapter two will be dedicated to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as I have already established that *The Handmaid's Tale* plays a role in the reception of the group of contemporary works I selected and I expect that it is of even greater importance to the idea that we are dealing with the emergence of a new genre. With respect to *The Handmaid's Tale* I will look at its reception by professional critics and by academics, as I expect there to be a difference between the types of labels used by critics and academics. Furthermore, I hope to come to an idea as to why it is *The Handmaid's Tale* that is so often used as example in reviews. In chapter three I will present a close analysis of the four works of which my corpus is composed. This will help me come to an understanding of which (combination of) features these novels share, how that relates to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and how that could be seen as feminist dystopian fiction. In chapter four I will focus on the literary field, for which I will look at reviews by professional critics and at the way in which the publishing houses have chosen to promote and label the four novels of which my corpus is composed. Lastly, I aim to bring all of this together in my conclusion.

Little or no (academic) attention has been paid to the question whether or not we can speak of the feminist dystopia as a distinct literary (sub)genre. In researching this specific question, I will show which aspects are of importance with regard to (the emergence of) genre and might shine a light on the literary field and the influence different actors have within that field. I will not only look at how the novels can be analysed as presenting feminist dystopian fiction, but will also strongly focus on the literary field by looking at how publishers and critics have dealt with the novels of which my corpus is composed. Clarity will be given on how different actors within the literary field deal with genre, how they use generic terms, and what their role is with respect to the rise of a (sub)genre. Also, this thesis will fill in a gap concerning the lack of academic attention that has been paid to the four contemporary novels of which my corpus is composed with regard to what type of fiction they present and how they can be labelled. The relevance of this thesis lies in the attention it pays to the feminist dystopia as a possibly new (sub)genre, as this might lead to the recognition it deserves, and perhaps needs. It may create possibilities for future research to ask questions concerning the time and context in which the (sub)genre has come into existence.

I have several hypotheses, one of which is that *The Handmaid's Tale* plays an important role in all facets of my research, which is why I have chosen to dedicate a chapter to the novel. I expect to find similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the other four novels I chose to study and analyse, which I hope can help me conclude that they present feminist dystopian fiction. Furthermore, I expect professional critics to compare the novels to *The Handmaid's Tale* and to also pinpoint what the similarities are between the works. Lastly, I expect that both critics and publishers have used generic labels for the four novels of which my corpus is composed and that, at least in the reviews by professional critics, the feminist dystopia is not left unacknowledged.

I will now first elaborate on theory on genre in chapter one. I will focus on more general theory on genre but also more specifically on theory in which genre is discussed in relation to the literary field and the marketplace.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Genre is a notion that has often been the subject of debate. It is one of the more ‘fuzzy’ subjects, as views differ as to what genres exist, what features are of importance when determining whether or not a group of works forms a genre (or is formed by a genre), and what exactly the function of genre is. Important concepts to take into account are time and context, as many different views have existed across time and still do across societies – making the debates revolving around genre even more complex. In addition, different types of genres exist across different disciplines. For example, the types of genres known and used to classify films can differ from the ones known and used for literature. The main focus of this chapter is on genre as it exists within the literary field, but sources aimed at genres in other disciplines may also be used, as more general ideas on genre found in these sources can still be of value for this chapter. The aim of this chapter is to elaborate on theory of genre, for which I will primarily focus on the discussions in the field that are of importance for my thesis. Hence, I will focus on some of the general discussions concerning genre but also more specifically on its relation to and importance for the literary field and marketplace.

Genre is best understood as a classification system. We use it to group works together so as to indicate both what these works are and what they are not – implying there is interrelatedness between genres. In “Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre” Amy J. Devitt refers to the idea of interrelatedness when she argues that “[w]e know genres by what they are not as well as by what they are; a text participates in genres that it rejects as well as in those it accepts, in genres that it avoids as well as those it embraces” (700). However, opinions differ when it comes to determining when to speak of a genre or a subgenre and what types of divisions to make. M.H. Abrams has, for example, suggested a division into three main classes: “poetic or lyric (uttered throughout in the first person); epic or narrative (in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets his characters speak for themselves); and drama (in which the characters do all the talking)” (qtd. in Bishop and Starkey 95). John Frow also discusses different types of divisions of literature into genres in *Genre: The New Critical Idiom*. His focus is on what can be said to be more broad and universal genres, such as the tragedy and the comedy. By universal is meant that they are known across countries while often also across disciplines. Daniel Chandler touches upon this idea of universal genres in “An Introduction to Genre Theory” when he says that “[i]n literature the broadest division is between poetry, prose and drama, within which there are further divisions, such as tragedy and comedy within the category of drama” (1). However, “contemporary media genres tend to relate more to specific forms than to the universals of

tragedy and comedy” (1), such as the detective, the thriller, or even the feminist dystopia. The number and variety of genres, however, is strongly dependant on the society that is under discussion and the time in which it is looked at.

This reinforces the idea that time and context are important factors to take into account. In *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007) Claire Squires discusses the importance of thinking of genre as subservient to time and context by referring to Todorov, who explains that “a society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology; that is why the existence of certain genres in one society, their absence in another, are revelatory of that ideology” (qtd. in Squires 72). Devitt also points out that “[d]ifferent reading publics have developed at different historical periods, with different literary ‘tastes’ and different commercial forces at work to encourage reading some works and even whole genres over others” (709). She explains that “genre is part of the cultural context within which writers and readers work” (699), which indicates that as time changes and as the literary field changes, so too will the genres that are known and the views that exist on particular genres. A result of this constant movement and change is the possible rise of new types of genres, which both influences the field and is influenced by the field.

In order to understand how genres may come into existence, it is essential to first look at what genre entails. Since genre is not fixed, neither are the views upon what needs to be looked at so as to think of a group of works as being formed by a genre or as forming a genre. The fact that these definitions are not fixed is visible in the variety of divisions that can be made when discussing genre and the different types of classification that exist. Also, for some genres the focus is more on what types of themes are presented, whereas for other genres the focus is more on feelings a work should evoke or the type of people it should revolve around. The latter was and is, for example, a way to distinguish between the universal genres tragedy and comedy. In the present day, however, we are, to refer back to Chandler’s statement, more concerned with specific forms of genre. It is essential to come to an idea as to what to focus on when determining whether or not to speak of a (new) (sub)genre and it is perhaps best to follow the idea that:

“Conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them” (Chandler 2).

So, a set of internal features – content and/or form – should be shared by a group of texts in such a combination that we can speak of a genre. However, Stephen Neale claims that “[p]articuliar features which are characteristic of a genre are not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive” (qtd. in Chandler 2). The features seen as belonging to a particular genre are not necessarily unique to that genre and they do not exist exclusively within the framework of that particular genre. This seems reasonable, as features belonging to a genre could easily occur individually in other (sub)genres as well. It might, for example, be the case that a science fiction or speculative fiction novel deals with the investigation of a mysterious crime, a theme or feature often found in detective novels. This is a feature the genres share, but the way in which it is presented or the combination with other features differs per type of fiction. Hence, it is important to look at the combination of the features and not at the features as separate aspects on a list that needs to be checked off.

Furthermore, it is not likely that all works within the same genre group contain all possible features belonging to that genre. If we follow contemporary theorists who “tend to describe genres in terms of 'family resemblances' among texts” (Chandler 2), it can be explained why works grouped under the same genre are similar but not identical. Thinking in terms of ‘family resemblances’ amongst works belonging to a genre is important in order to come to an understanding as to how new genres may rise out of existing genres. Chandler explains that “[e]ach new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres)” (3). This means that within a genre certain works can differ from other works while still incorporating similar features and/or combination of features. If numerous works start to present a similar type of distance from the ‘original genre’ it might perhaps be best to consider another generic label that is more suitable, as we tend to focus on specific generic forms nowadays. This is important to the function of genre as framework, as the generic label then also influences how a text is read.

Another aspect genre can have influence on is the attribution of value or quality to particular works – mainly due to a certain status being attached to particular types of genres. A discussion that has dominated the field for quite some time, and still does, is the debate concerning the division of literature into genre fiction and literary fiction. Squires discusses this by referring to Steven Connor. He writes that “[l]iterary fiction is usually defined by negation – it is *not* formula fiction or genre fiction, *not* mass-market or bestselling fiction – and, by subtraction, it is what is left once most of the conditions that obtain in contemporary

publishing are removed” (qtd. in Squires 4). Squires adds to this that “‘Literary’ fiction, Connor suggests, is the fiction published by a company that cannot be described in more formally, or formulaically, generic terms: it is not crime or science fiction, romance or fantasy” (4-5). This shows a division between two types of literature, one being ‘literary’ and one being ‘genre fiction.’ Genre fiction is thus any work that can be labelled through generic terms. Hence, this type of classification not only signals what can be expected of a work but, since ‘literary fiction’ is by some regarded as the ‘better’ type of fiction, also attributes status or value to a novel.

Nonetheless, many have argued that no text is genre-less or outside of a classification system. Squires explains that even ‘literary fiction’ can be classified as a genre, as it concerns a group that shares a feature: it cannot be grouped under any of the genres thought of as genre fiction. It becomes a specific group on its own by rejecting a group it definitely is not part of. Jacques Derrida also says that “every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres” (qtd. in Devitt 699). Devitt adds to this that “literary genre theorists (other than Croce and his followers) have largely rejected the romantic notion that literary texts escape genre, that the ‘best’ literary works are those that cannot be categorized, those that no genre can hold” (699-700). Whether it concerns labelling a work by placing a genre on it or by labelling it by arguing that no genre can hold it and that it is thus ‘literary fiction’ rather than ‘genre fiction’, it shows that the aim is to *classify* works. Both meaning, value, and expectations can be attached to a work through classification. I will not further discuss possible effects of this on, for example, the likelihood that a work will be shortlisted or nominated for prizes, as this is a discussion that results in a type of analysis that is not directly relevant for my research. I am, however, interested in the fact that – aside from the idea that a certain status may be attached to it – many publishers and writers actively label their work through the use of genres and what their motivations are in doing so.

Firstly, labelling works creates order in the masses of works that exist. It seems that this order is needed for and in our current marketplace. Squires also mentions this when she argues that we need to arrange all the types of works that are being published, as “[t]he prolific and diverse nature of the marketplace demands it; the sheer number of individual product lines calls out for some sort of taxonomy, and so the multiple agencies in the field of literary publishing provide them via a variety of processes” (Squires 71). This indicates that by placing works in pigeon-holes through the use of generic labels order is created in the masses of works of which the marketplace consists.

Secondly, through the use of generic labels it can be signalled to the public what type of literature is presented and thus what can be expected of a work. Squires explains that genre is “a crucial component in the marketplace, as it is one of the primary means by which authors and readers communicate” (70). This ties in with the idea that “[g]enres are not simply features of texts, but are mediating frameworks between texts, makers and interpreters” (Chandler 8). Through genre an audience can both create expectations of the work and make meaning of what is presented. This indicates that genre is not only concerned with internal features of texts, but also has to do with recognition by the field, as the generic label can attract a specific audience and can influence the way in which a work is read.

The framework function of genres is essential to the role of the publisher, who has external interests. Squires states that genre “is as much an agency in the publishing field as publishers, booksellers and the other symbolic brokers, though it also affects and is affected by them” (72). She adds to this that genre can be seen “as a model of writing for authors that draws upon the horizons of expectation of readers” (73), for which she uses the example of Andrew Miller who changed his writing because he was not particularly fond of the generic label placed upon him through his earlier works. In Miller’s case it had primarily to do with dissatisfaction towards a type of generic label as it was seen as devalued, but it may also be the case that a writer or publisher wants to create a kind of image or attract a kind of audience. This shows both how genre can shape authors and works, but also how authors – and many other agents in the field – can use genre to their advantage. By placing a work within the frames of a genre the audience knows what to expect from that work or can be guided towards a preferred reading, as they may read the novel as belonging to that genre because they knew it was labelled as such before they began reading. It seems that genre could in many ways be seen as a navigator that gives ‘direction’ to both those who are not yet and those who are already reading the work defined by a generic label. The publisher can make use of this generic framework to attract a type of audience and to signal what type of fiction is presented.

All in all, genre may best be seen as a minor field on its own that both influences and is influenced by actors around it. All genres are interrelated in a way, but also stand in a hierarchical order. If we think of, for example, ‘literary fiction’ as a genre – as it is also a classification of a particular type of fiction, namely one which cannot be grouped under genre fiction – it shows how, for some, certain status is attached to that. This hierarchy between the genres, however, is in constant movement. So, “the order formed between and among genres should be regarded as a historically changing system rather than as a logical order” (Frow 71), which, again, reinforces the importance of time and context. Furthermore, the value that is

attached to certain genres can vary over time, as other types of genres can be more valued by an audience after an x amount of time. The so-called order amongst genres can and often is influenced by all kinds of actors in the literary field. If, for example, a type of fiction becomes more apparent through attention it receives, which can happen because it is on shortlists or has its own place in bookshops, then it might be more attractive to label any work that shares features with it as such, especially if the audience shows interest in this type of fiction. This constant movement in the hierarchies and attention paid to specific genres etcetera is highly influenced by the field, but simultaneously influences the field. As I discussed earlier: if a type of fiction moves down on the hierarchical ladder it can be less attractive to be regarded as a writer of that type of fiction, whereas a writer who is connoted with a genre who moved up on the ladder might gain in prominence. However, it is the field that can attach a certain value to a genre by paying attention to it in the form of prizes or shortlists. This shows the complexities of who influences who and also the complexities of why all the movements happens in a certain context. The role of the publisher – and of many others who are involved in the creation and promotion of a work – is thus also a complex one: s/he has to take into account what is happening in the field, but can simultaneously reinforce new movements and developments.

I have shown that genre is in many ways a complex subject matter. It serves several functions and is itself an important actor that both influences the field and is influenced by the field. Although many views exist upon what genres exactly are, what genres exist at the moment, what the function of a genre is and what features should be looked at, this chapter has also shown that consensus is not completely absent. This chapter has given direction to what views and ideas upon the matter exist and has laid the foundations for the rest of this thesis. I have shown that genre is concerned with both internal features of texts and recognition by the field, which is why I will not only provide a close analysis of the four novels of which my corpus is composed in chapter three but will also pay specific attention to the field in chapter four. However, I will first focus on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in chapter two, as I expect that this novel has ties with the novels of which my corpus is composed and is thus of particular importance for my thesis.

Chapter Two: *The Handmaid's Tale*

As I was reading reviews on the novels of which my corpus is composed I realised how often Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is mentioned in reviews written on other novels. It seems that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was published in 1985, represents something – some form of writing or a distinct type of fiction containing specific features – that causes it to become like a touchstone for a group of contemporary works. Atwood herself has said that the novel “has become a sort of tag for those writing about shifts towards policies aimed at controlling women, and especially women's bodies and reproductive functions” (“Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*”). Before dealing with what exactly the novels of which the corpus is composed and *The Handmaid's Tale* have in common – which I will do in chapter three –, it is important to first explore what it is about Atwood's work that makes this such a suitable framework. I will look at the reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the 1980s, at the reception of the novel now, and at how the novel has been analysed by academics, so as to come to an understanding of how this novel has been labelled and how that serves its framework function.

The Handmaid's Tale revolves around Offred, who is a handmaiden and lives in the household of The Commander and his wife Serena Joy. Offred stands for ‘of Fred’, which is a name given to her as she is not allowed to use her own name but instead has to be named after her master The Commander. The handmaidens are the only fertile women left in the Republic of Gilead, the result of which is that they only serve one purpose, namely to become pregnant with their commander's child and to leave the child with him and his infertile wife. Offred is the narrator of the story, hence the title, and while she tells the story of her life as it is in Gilead society, she also often has flashbacks to her life before Gilead. The reader learns that she was married to Luke and that they had a daughter together. Now, however, she is a handmaiden who has had doctrine-like training by the aunts who taught her to be obedient and subservient to men and to be solely concerned with bearing children. She is not supposed to be thinking about her ‘before-life’, is not supposed to speak to people who she does not necessarily have to speak to, not supposed to read, and she wears clothes that prevent her from looking around and that mark her status as fertile handmaiden. It is thanks to The Commander that Offred can enjoy some leisure, as he allows her to read magazines, plays scrabble with her, and takes her to other places in the middle of the night. All in all, the novel shows a society in which women are seen as property and as subservient to men, and in which it is believed that it is for the better that they are under strict control. Nonetheless, the role of the women is an important one and Gilead society could not exist without them.

The reception in the 1980s

My focus will now first be on what professional critics wrote about *The Handmaid's Tale* in the 1980s. By professional critics I mean critics writing for newspapers, magazines, news platforms, or weblogs who receive money for their articles. In order to come to an idea of what critics in newspapers thought of Atwood's novel in the 1980s, I searched for reviews from 1985 up to and including 1989 on *LexisNexis Academic* by using the search terms "'The Handmaid's Tale' book reviews." These years were selected so as to remain close to the publication date. Only book reviews were selected, which means interviews, columns, and articles in which the novel is shortly mentioned as candidate for a shortlist or prize were not included. There are two reasons why I chose to focus exclusively on professional critics and their reviews as defined above: (1) the line had to be drawn somewhere, and since in reviews the focus is mostly on the novel that is being discussed I selected these so as to (2) remain close to discussion of the novel, as this gives a good indication of how it has been received and what type of (generic) labels critics use. Furthermore, I am interested in seeing the difference between professional critics and academics, which is why I chose to exclude literary reviews in scholarly journals, as these are, in my view, an in-between field that cannot righteously be grouped under either the professional critics or the academics. So, in order to draw a clear line between professional critics and academics I have chosen to not incorporate literary reviews. I gathered a total of eleven professional reviews, which is a reasonable number as the aim is to get an overall impression of the professional critics' reception in the 1980s.

An aspect that is often pointed out is the element of warning that is present in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One critic says that "Atwood has written a powerful, compelling novel with overtones of a future that could occur" ("Book Reviews"). Others refer to Atwood's novel as a cautionary tale, while linking it to others works that contain a form of warning concerning the future. For example, "*The Handmaid's Tale* is in the honorable tradition of *Brave New World* and other warnings of dystopia" (French). The work most often mentioned is Orwell's *1984* (1949). Seven critics name the novel, six of which make a comparison between *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and one makes an indirect comparison as the author of the piece refers to statements others have made. An example of a review in which a critic makes a direct comparison between *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is the following: "[j]ust as the world of Orwell's *1984* gripped our imaginations, so will the world of Atwood's handmaid. She has succeeded in finding a voice for her heroine that is direct, artless, utterly convincing" (Johnson). Johnson later adds to this that "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that

brilliantly illuminates some of the darker interconnections of politics and sex, and it will no doubt be labeled a ‘feminist *1984*.’” Two other critics refer to Orwell himself rather than to his work. They call it the “Orwellian genre” (Lehmann-Haupt) or say that “in this Orwellian dystopia half-a-century on, women have been restored to the home” (Warner). All in all, the critics in the 1980s place *The Handmaid’s Tale* in a tradition of works regarded as cautionary tales, of which Orwell’s *1984* is often taken as the pioneer. This shows that critics define *The Handmaid’s Tale* by its connection to other works of fiction. These works are primarily dystopian cautionary tales, which, as can be concluded on the basis of these reviews, was seen as a distinct group of fiction.

The Handmaid’s Tale now

Whereas I mainly encountered book reviews on *The Handmaid’s Tale* itself when I searched for articles about the novel from the 1980s, all sorts of articles appear when I search for *The Handmaid’s Tale* in articles from the past year. It is apparent that two types of articles most often appear on *LexisNexis Academic*: (1) articles written on the Hulu adaptation of the novel, (2) reviews written on other works in which the author of the piece refers to *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The Hulu series premiered in April 2017 and appears to be a success. It is, for example, said that “[t]hanks to *Tale*, Hulu has finally jumped into the prestige-TV pigpile that also includes streaming competitors like Amazon and Netflix” (Raftery). Although no viewing statistics have been made public – or at least cannot be found –, it is said on Hulu’s website that “*The Handmaid’s Tale* premiere has been watched by more Hulu viewers than any other series premiere – original or acquired – on the service, drawing acclaim from both fans and critics” (“Hulu Amplifies Growth With Original Series Orders”). Within a year after the series aired it has won and was nominated for quite a number of prizes. For example, in 2017 the series won the Emmy award for Best Drama Series and in 2018 it won the Golden Globe award for Best TV Series in the category Drama. Lots of others prizes were won by individual actors, the writers and producers, and others concerned with the cinematography and more. This shows the amount of attention the series has received, which may have also caused the novel to receive more attention. Lately the novel has been reappearing in lists of bestselling novels. For example, *The New York Times* has a list of bestsellers in the section ‘paperback trade fiction’ on its website, in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be found. It has

been on the list for at least fifty weeks and is currently the seventh on the list. Although it cannot be said with certainty that this revival of the novel's popularity is entirely due to the series, it does show the ongoing interest in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Part of the success of *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to lie in its ongoing relevance, as it can be read as a reflection of current events and societies. The novel and its adaptation are often brought into relation with the president of the United States, Donald Trump, and the current situation in America – both by actors of the series, journalists, and critics. For example, Ron Charles, a journalist and critic, says:

“‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ has sold about a million copies since the ascension of Donald Trump, making it one of the most popular novels of the unpopular president’s first year. Surely, Hulu’s Emmy-winning adaptation jacked up even more interest, but it didn’t hurt that Republicans kept releasing photos from Gilead of white guys congratulating each other for curtailing women’s rights” (“Do We Need Another ‘Handmaid’s Tale’?”).

However, not all critics agree on this comparison. Rich Lowry argues in the *New York Post* that *The Handmaid's Tale* has nothing to do with Trump or contemporary America. While discussing the Hulu series he debunks the ideas expressed by many that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a reflection of contemporary America with regard to governmental control on women's bodies and reproduction. He says: “[f]air enough. ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ does have something to tell us about, say, Saudi Arabia. But, in an uncomfortable fact for Christian-fearing feminists, none of the world’s women-hating theocracies are Christian” (Lowry). Although some, like Lowry, might not agree with the comparison made between *The Handmaid's Tale* and contemporary America, there are still critics and journalists who, like Charles, do feel that *The Handmaid's Tale* contains an element of caution concerning current events or even whole societies.

Even if there is no consensus amongst critics regarding the novel's relation to Trump and contemporary America, that does not debunk the idea that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be seen as relevant in that it reflects or comments on contemporary societies. The discussion about whether or not Atwood's novel is applicable to the twenty-first century and the fact that some argue it does, shows the novel is still relevant enough to publically debate on. Furthermore, Lowry states he disagrees with the comparison with America, but does agree there might be similarities between the novel and other societies, such as Saudi Arabia. Making a comparison between *The Handmaid's Tale* and other societies than present-day American society has been done by others as well. Seth. J. Frantzman argues in the *Jerusalem*

Post that the novel shows similarities to contemporary Iran. He argues that “Iran’s regime is a real-life version of the television series *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, to which he adds that “Iran’s regime is *the Handmaid’s Tale*, not in some obscure, dark fantasy novel or a TV show, but in the daily life 40 million Iranian women are subjected to.” Mary Adams compares *The Handmaid’s Tale* to the Taliban when she says that:

“Instead of visualizing Offred, a white woman whose face is obscured by blinders, let us imagine a Middle Eastern woman hidden by the burka. As Offred plays a secret game of Scrabble, let’s remember the women who risked their lives teaching Afghan girls. When Gilead kills its rebels, let’s be reminded of the senseless cruelties in Afghanistan and beyond” (75).

Examples like the ones provided here show the ways in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* is applicable to different contexts, different societies, and different moments in time. Some take Atwood’s novel as an example of contemporary America, others see it as a reflection of Saudi Arabia or Iran. This shows that the novel was seen as relevant and as interesting to write about in the 1980s and is still seen as such in the present. The possibility to apply the narrative of the handmaidens to different societies and contexts might be cause of its ongoing popularity and of the ongoing interest in it – both by producers, academics, and critics.

It is striking how often *The Handmaid’s Tale* is mentioned in reviews on novels that portray similar kind of narratives. It seems that Atwood is right in saying that the novel has become a sort of ‘tag’ or framework to contemporary novels that are regarded as similar to it. Looking at reviews on *The Power*, Ron Charles, for example, says in *The Washington Post* that “Alderman has written our era’s ‘Handmaid’s Tale,’” and, like Margaret Atwood’s classic, “*The Power*” is one of those essential feminist works that terrifies and illuminates, enrages and encourages.” Ruth La Ferla introduces the novel as follows: “[p]ublished last year by Little, Brown, it was named one of the *New York Times* Book Review’s 10 Best Books of 2017 and has been described as ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ for a millennial generation.” Apart from the novels of which my corpus is composed, other novels have also been compared to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. An example is Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks* (2018). In *Atlantic Online* Sophie Gilbert writes that:

“But the speculative aspects of the book, combined with Zumas’s historical and sociological insights, inevitably bring to mind Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s*

Tale. Zumas, like Atwood, has grounded her book in reality-in things that existing people have said and done.”

I could have selected numerous examples of reviews in which a novel is compared to *The Handmaid's Tale* but have only selected these few so as to give an indication of what critics write and how they refer to Atwood's novel in reviews on other novels. I will elaborate on what critics say when comparing a novel to *The Handmaid's Tale* in chapter four, which is when I will look closely at professional reviews on the four novels of which my corpus is composed.

Academic attention

Aside from all the media attention, Atwood's novel has also received considerable academic attention and has, from the moment it was published, been the subject of debate. All sorts of articles containing an analysis of the novel appeared and still remain appearing. It shows the novel is not only of interest to film makers, television producers, and critics, but also to academics. That the novel is such a popular and all-round success – interesting to all kinds of fields – may also be why it is often used as touchstone for particular contemporary fiction. I will now discuss some of the main points of discussion in the academic field concerning *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Both critics and academics have labelled *The Handmaid's Tale* as dystopian fiction. The part of the novel academics often analyse when arguing that Atwood's novel presents (critical) dystopian fiction is the 'historical notes' section, which is part of the fictional narrative and presented at the end of the novel. The section depicts a society in 2195, which means Gilead is long gone and things have improved – at least if we view 2195 in comparison to Gilead Society. An article published in the late 1980s that focuses on the importance of the 2195 society is David Ketterer's "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia." Ketterer argues that the novel is a dystopia in the sense that it contains "lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempt (in this case by Offred's friend, identified by her real name, Moira), and an underground movement" (211), but that, due to the 'historical notes', it does not portray typical dystopian fiction. Ketterer states that "Pieixoto's prissy academic jokes and the laughter they elicit from his audience provide evidence that sexist attitudes still persist" (214). In "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction" Patrick D. Murphy also

argues this by saying that “[t]he most serious point raised about the present in terms of the future, not that of Gilead but of the liberal post-Gilead culture, is how little has been learned” (34). This indicates both men argue that the element of warning in Atwood’s novel lies in the ‘historical notes’, which is because 2195 is presented as a more civilised but not necessarily a more admirable society. Like the critics in the 1980s, Ketterer and Murphy, albeit indirectly, refer to *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a cautionary tale. The caution is, however, seen as an aspect of (critical) dystopian fiction and thus an essential and logical part of their analysis and discussion of the novel.

A term that is much more common in academic discussions of *The Handmaid’s Tale* than in the earlier reviews on the novel in the 1980s is the term ‘feminist.’ Looking back at the reviews from the 1980s there was only one professional critic who said that “[o]ne might call this a feminist theological novel” (Adachi) and another who predicted “it will no doubt be labelled a ‘feminist 1984’” (Johnson). Johnson’s prediction is interesting, as she is one of the first critics who makes a link between the novel’s feminist aspects and its dystopian aspects. Nevertheless, the main focus remains on the comparison with Orwell’s *1984*, as Johnson labels Atwood’s work as a feminist version of Orwell’s novel – a type of comparison that is no longer as current as it once was. There was one other critic who discussed *The Handmaid’s Tale* in relation to feminism, namely Mary McCarthy. In her review in the *New York Times* she does not, however, directly label the novel as feminist but deals more closely with the – in her view – ‘excessive feminism’ in the novel, as she argues that the feminism presented in the novel appears to be one of the causes of Gilead society. McCarthy states that the ‘excessive’ feminism “seems to bear some responsibility for Gilead, to be one of its causes. The kind of doctrinaire feminism likely to produce a backlash is exemplified in the narrator’s absurd mother”, as her mother wanted a women’s culture and Gilead has, in McCarthy’s view, become just that. McCarthy is highly critical of Atwood’s work and it seems her review has had great impact, since quite a few academics have responded to it.

Part of the earlier discussed academic article by Ketterer is in response to McCarthy’s claims. Whereas McCarthy argues that the novel has thin credibility, Ketterer argues that “McCarthy seems not to have allowed for the fact that the future Atwood describes was surely not conceived as a direct extrapolation from our present but as a pendulum swing away from present-day feminism. Given that intention, the historical steps that lead to Gilead are, I believe, plausible enough” (215). McCarthy also compares *The Handmaid’s Tale* to *1984* and

bases some judgment on that, which, in Ketterer's view, is not an accurate comparison and hence not a good one to base one's judgment on. He says that "in the light of the concluding 'Historical Notes' and what I have argued is the novel's generic status as a particular kind of Contextual Dystopia, possibly the first of its kind, purely destructive satire would be quite out of place" (216). He here refers to his analysis of the novel in which he explains that due to the 'Historical Notes' Atwood's dystopia is different from, for example, *1984*, because it portrays a dystopian society combined with another society, namely 2195, which reflects upon the former dystopian society that has passed. This shows a move away from the comparison critics often made between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *1984*.

Whereas the terms 'dystopian' and 'feminist' appeared in both the professional reviews and the academic journals, the term 'feminist dystopia' is not mentioned in the reviews from the 1980s but has been mentioned in (earlier) academic articles on *The Handmaid's Tale*. Two examples are Ildney Cavalcanti's "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias" and Libby Falk Jones's "Breaking Silences in Feminist Dystopias." Both focus on the importance of silence and speaking in feminist dystopias and analyse these aspects in Atwood's novel. It is argued that "[c]ontemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation" (Cavalcanti 152), which is reflected in *The Handmaid's Tale* in that "women are objectified and repressed; the dominant metaphor is that of silence" (Jones 7). The handmaidens are hardly allowed to speak, restricted in what they read, and forbidden to play (language) games. On the basis of Ketterer's article in which it is argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a contextual dystopia, it could also be argued that certain critical commentary can be read into the depiction of the 2195 society with regard to how society deals with women and the dangers that lie in continuing that trend. The ignorance in the 2195 society, embodied by Piexoto who makes sexist jokes and does not take Offred's tale seriously, can be read as a warning for our current society. Jones states that "Atwood suggests that 200 years from now, despite all our efforts to break silences, to restore to women their voices, it may still be happening. 2195 may be a future even more dystopian than Gilead" (10-11). Although Jones's focus is on the silencing in the academic realm, the 2195 society could also be read as commentary on contemporary society as a whole. The society in 2195 has improved compared to the Gilead society, but there is still sexism. The historical notes give the insight that even if it is believed that a society has improved, and even if it has indeed improved on some grounds, there are always certain aspects people are blind to see. All in all, what is most

important here is that Atwood's novel has been analysed and recognised as presenting feminist dystopian fiction and that the novel found its ties with the label 'feminist dystopia' in the academic realm.

Lastly, Atwood herself has also commented on whether *The Handmaid's Tale* should or can be read as a feminist novel or not. In response to the question if *The Handmaid's Tale* is feminist she says that "[i]f you mean a novel in which women are human beings — with all the variety of character and behavior that implies — and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes" ("Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump"). What makes this type of discussion complex is that the term 'feminist' in itself is a complex one, as a variety of opinions exist as to what exactly feminism entails, which then further complicates what it would mean for a novel to be feminist. Atwood clearly gives a definition of what 'feminist' could mean – simultaneously a definition she agrees with – with regard to her own novel. However, it is not likely that this is the definition used by others who would label or have labelled *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist novel. Furthermore, the obvious close ties Atwood has with her own work may cause her to not be able to see how it could be read as a feminist work, as she reads the novel from her point of view and knows what her own intentions were while writing it. Although Atwood might not have meant *The Handmaid's Tale* to be a feminist work, that does not mean that it cannot be read as such. I will explain in the following chapter how the novel can be seen as presenting feminist fiction.

The Handmaid's Tale and genre.

The Handmaid's Tale is a good example of how several genres or features of genres can exist within one work. The novel can definitely be said to be part of the group of speculative fiction, which is more like an 'umbrella' genre, as it is often argued that, for example, utopian and dystopian fiction are subgenres of this broader genre. Speculative fiction is precisely what its name reveals: it concerns fiction which speculates about, for example, the future. To narrow it down, *The Handmaid's Tale* is also part of the group of (critical) dystopian fiction, since it presents an unpleasant world that seems impossible to become ours but can be closer than one suspects, as it draws attention to already existing problems in the world as we know it. This also shows the 'cautionary' part of this type of fiction – which was often pointed out by critics writing reviews on the novel in the 1980s –, as it seems to contain a form of

warning concerning contemporary society. Lastly, the novel has also been labelled as feminist – or as a feminist dystopia. This label was primarily placed upon the work by academics and not directly by the critics in the 1980s. Rita Felski explains in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* that towards the end of the twentieth century, so around the 1970s / 1980s, there was “the development of feminism as a theoretical discourse and the growth of women’s studies as an academic discipline” (13), which might explain this focus on the novel as feminist amongst academics and not as much amongst professional critics. It is likely that with the rise of feminist theories and feminist reading of novels more novels began to be analysed as feminist because of aspects in it that could be recognised as such. This shows the link between the rise of feminist theories and women’s studies as academic disciplines and the recognition of works as feminist literature. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is nowadays often acknowledged as feminist literature, but these roots seem to lie in the earlier analyses by academics in the 1980s. A more specific definition of feminist literature and further explanation as to how *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be said to be presenting feminist literature will be given in chapter three.

I explained in chapter one that works within a genre often contain similar types of features but that new works could possibly influence the rise of new (sub)genres. Regarding the generic labelling of *The Handmaid’s Tale* it is noticeable that whereas in the 1980s *The Handmaid’s Tale* was compared to other known dystopian works, such as Orwell’s *1984*, and placed in a framework set by other works of fiction, it has now become a framework or touchstone for other works of fiction that are regarded as similar to it. Felski speaks of a rise of “the emergence of a large and distinctive body of feminist literature in the last two decades” (1), which “can be understood as both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them” (1). What she thus says is that both the conditions have changed to such an extent that more feminist literature is being created and that due the emergence of feminist theories more works are now analysed and regarded as feminist literature, as the possibility has been created to do so. This may have led to insights regarding Atwood’s novel in that it no longer suffices to place a work regarded as feminist in a tradition of works that are not. Hence, it may be that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is no longer directly linked to *1984* with which it shares its dystopian character but not its feminist character. *The Handmaid’s Tale* has become a kind of pioneer for contemporary works itself, which is visible in how often the novel is referred to in reviews on other novels. Atwood’s work seems to serve as an indication of what can be expected of the work under discussion.

Regarding its framework-function it might be that *The Handmaid's Tale* has attained such a status that it has become 'the' work that other similar type of works are linked to, or it might be that a certain type of (feminist) fiction similar to *The Handmaid's Tale* but not to, for example, *1984* has risen to such an extent that a new framework is needed. By framework is meant that it seems to function as a sort of touchstone for other works. It is important to note that "[g]enre is neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers" (Frow 102). Genre is best seen as a label based upon the combination of a set of features contained within a work. Hence, works containing this specific combination of features can be classified as a specific genre. Genre can then become the framework, as the combination of a group of features becomes tied to a generic label. However, when existing genres no longer suffice as classification, another type of framework is needed, which in this case is a role that seems to be fulfilled by *The Handmaid's Tale*. Why exactly *The Handmaid's Tale* was chosen cannot be answered, but it is likely that it has to do with its ongoing relevance and hence popularity – amongst critics, academics, and television producers - which has made it such a worldwide known work. In order to understand what the framework created by *The Handmaid's Tale* exactly is, it is necessary to analyse some works of fiction that have been brought into relation with it.

Therefore, in the following chapter I will focus on the internal features by analysing the novels of which my corpus is composed and by comparing them to *The Handmaid's Tale*. I do this so as to come to an idea what the (sub)genre feminist dystopia entails and what types of works it encompasses.

Chapter Three: Internal Features

The focus of this chapter will be on what internal features the four novels of which my corpus is composed and *The Handmaid's Tale* share and how that is presented, so as to come to an understanding of what the feminist dystopia as a (sub)genre entails. The four novels that will be analysed are Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, and Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters*. Short summaries of the novels can be found in appendix A. The aspect all four novels have in common is that they have been linked to *The Handmaid's Tale* in reviews by professional critics. I selected only these four novels, as the scope of this thesis demands a limited number of novels used for closer analysis and discussion.

In this chapter I will focus on analysing the four novels while comparing them to *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I do so as to clarify both why 'feminist dystopia' is the appropriate generic label to use and what it entails. Due to *The Power* portraying a different type of dystopian world compared to the other three it is hard to discuss all four novels simultaneously. Therefore, *The Power* will often be analysed separately. Since 'feminist dystopia' is a combination of two seemingly separate types of fiction, namely feminist fiction and dystopian fiction, the genre feminist dystopia will be divided into two 'parts' for closer analysis. Hence, I will first focus on how the novels present dystopian fiction, after which I will analyse how they can be seen as presenting feminist literature. Nonetheless, as will become clear as my discussion of the novels ensues, the dystopian and feminist aspects in these novels do not stand apart. I cannot argue why the novels are feminist without also incorporating their dystopian features, as these are inevitably intertwined.

Dystopian features.

Dystopian fiction presents an imagined place or society, often unpleasant and undesirable, which knows both oppression and rebellion. In *The Handmaid's Tale* this is portrayed through a past society named Gilead, in which citizens – and especially fertile women – are suppressed and have most of the basic rights they used to have taken away due to a new form of governmental control. Aside from this form of oppression, there is also rebellion. This happens on a small scale as the Commander lets Offred enjoy some leisure, but also on a larger scale when, towards the end of novel, Offred plans a secret escape. The type of

dystopia presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* is one which deviates from what has been labelled the 'classic dystopia' and can best be described as the 'critical dystopia.'

An important aspect of the critical dystopia is that a form of utopia exists within it. In "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" Raffaella Baccolini discusses dystopian fiction and explains that "[u]topia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only outside the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a future" (520). She makes a distinction between two types of dystopias when she argues that the critical dystopia differs from the classical dystopia in that it shows a utopian hope, a possibility to escape from the dystopian future (521). Andrew Milner discusses this same idea in the chapter "Science Fiction and Dystopia" of *Locating Science Fiction* (2012) when he says that "there are two main kinds of loosely 'dystopian' text" (116), one of which is the critical dystopia "which functions by way of a warning" (116). Both Baccolini and Milner address the warning in dystopian fiction, which is the more utopian aspect – the part that contains the hope to escape from such a bleak future. What they mean to say is that the utopian aspect lies in the hope we can have by reading the text as a warning, as this gives the ability to escape from the dystopian world. I will continue to refer to the genre 'feminist dystopia', but the type of dystopia discussed is the one that has been labelled critical. What is needed for a dystopia to be critical is: (1) the presented world cannot differ too much from the world as we know it, because it could not function as a warning otherwise, and (2) it is partly utopian, as there is often hope, however small, for a better world or for a way to escape from the dystopian world.

The idea of oppression and rebellion is clearly visible in all four novels, three of which portray features comparable to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *Future Home of the Living God*, *The Carhullan Army*, and *Gather the Daughters* the oppression comes in the form of a totalitarian government or a (new) kind of authority that aims at controlling the lives of its citizens. In all four novels, women, as in Gilead society, are the group that directly suffers the consequences of these newer forms of control, as they have most of their basic rights, and most importantly their freedom, taken away. This is because the authorities are primarily concerned with enforcing control over their citizens' production or pregnancy – resulting in strict rule over women.

The rebellion happens amongst citizens and in all the novels the main characters are part of that rebellious group. Firstly, in *Future Home of the Living God* Cedar rebels by

working together with other pregnant women in the hospital and by receiving help from both her families. She rebels by not conforming to the rules made by the government regarding the birth of her child and the ensuing control they could possibly have over her child. Secondly, in *The Carhullan Army* contraception has become compulsory and reproduction is regulated. In this world of chaos a group of women rebels by not conforming to the Authority's rules. Rebellion in this novel is not only presented by the group of women – and a small group of men – who do not live under the direct rule of the Authority and so rather passively live freely, but they also actively go against the Authority by planning an attack when their way of living comes under threat. Lastly, in *Gather the Daughters* a self-authorized group called The Wanderers has constituted a set of laws which define what the people that form the communion are and are not allowed to do, resulting in a society in which the lives of both men and women are completely planned out. Especially (young) women are displeased with the way their lives are being regulated, as their lives are completely dependable on what in the novel is called their fruition – the moment they mature and become ‘real women who can bare children.’ It seems that their worth is based solely on their ability to reproduce and their life is almost entirely regulated by their authorities. The rebellion is started by younger girls, who feel there is and must be a way for them to escape from their undesirable destiny. Hence, in all three novels primarily women form the rebellion against their oppressors, as they are also the ones that most directly suffer the consequences of the (governmental) control.

The three novels show different forms of rebellion, but they all show that the hope lies in being able to escape. For Cedar, her rebellion is more focused on finding a way to escape individually. Those she is close to are not pregnant, which is why she is the one who primarily needs help and the others offer her that help. The young girls in *Gather the Daughters*, however, do not only want to change their own lives but also the lives of those yet to come, such as their own daughters. Their rebellion is aimed at changing the rules and hence the foundations on which their community stands. Whereas these first two novels show an active form of rebellion, the rebellion in *The Carhullan Army* begins more passively. The group of women, and some men who are part of the group but not living with the women, create a self-sufficient communion away from the city and outside of the Authority's reach. Later, however, their rebellion becomes active when their communion comes under direct threat from the Authority and they choose to form their own army to fight against the Authority. By trying to take over (parts of) the city so as to show the Authority that they will not let their rights be taken away, they actively rebel against it. While the forms of oppression, the types

of rebellion, the motivations to start a rebellion, and the effects of the rebellion differ per novel, it clearly shows all three novels present a world that knows oppression and rebellion against that oppression. The hope lies entirely in the rebellion, as this is the way for all characters to change their lives and to hopefully create a better future.

A different type of dystopian world is presented in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. The world that is presented is a world similar to ours, but women have now gained in power through a sort of organ within them that has been activated. Men are now in the subordinate position, as they are the ones who suffer the direct consequences from this new form of control. It shows a reversal of the roles in some sense, as women are predominantly the leaders of troops and countries and are definitely no longer regarded as the weaker sex. The oppression is formed by women, as they have gained almost full control due to their bodily power. The rebellion begins with one of the novel's main characters, and the only male character, Tunde, who reports what is happening around the world as women are slowly taking over, which often highlights the negative side to it and is not appreciated by all. Roxy is his ally in some sense, as she helps him escape when a group of aggressive women is hunting him down. Although the rebellious aspect in this novel is not as straightforward as in the others, it can be said that Tunde initiates the rebellion by not letting fear take over and by continuing to report on what dangers exist. Both he and others like Roxy form the utopian aspect, the hope, because as long as there are men willing to fight, or as long as there are women who are willing to use their powers for good purposes, there is hope to escape such a dystopian world. This is partially comparable to the other three novels, as they all in have in common that the ones who are in a subordinate position are also the ones starting the rebellion.

The element of warning in *The Power* seems more complicated compared to the other three novels, as it is not aimed at the amount of power an extreme kind of authority or government can receive but seems more focused on how power should be distributed amongst the sexes. It is not desirable that any sex has full control. We do not want women to be deprived of their freedom and this novel shows that neither do we want this to happen to men. We do not want there to only be male leaders, but neither do we solely want women as world leaders. Besides, the novel shows that violence is not the way to solve problems. The main weapon women have is their body, as they have an organ which men do not have. This inequality in bodily strength results in all kinds of other inequalities. Although the novel presents a kind of reversal of the roles, the fact that it is a reversal of the roles displays its

hidden warning: we do not want the world to be ruled like this, so perhaps it is time for change.

A last point that should be raised and that concerns all five novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* included, is that the utopian aspect is also present directly *within* these works. It is not only the recognition of the element of warning that can give hope, but, as I have shown, also the rebellion presented in these narratives. As long as there is a possibility to escape through rebellion, we are never completely lost and doomed to live in a dystopian future. Furthermore, none of these novels have a definitive ending and remain open, which means we are never truly sure how the lives of those who formed the rebellion ended. Baccolini explains that “the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work” (520), as it allows readers to hope. Perhaps those who formed the rebellion succeeded and were able to escape from their authorities or perhaps the authorities were eventually overruled because of the rebellion. We can never know, and so we can hope. This indicates that the utopian aspect in these dystopian worlds lies in the hope to escape, not solely through reading the novels as a warning but also through recognising there is a possibility to escape, which is in all five novels presented by those in a subordinate position – those who dare to think against the grain and to rebel.

Feminist features.

Before discussing the feminist aspects of these novels, it is essential to first define what is understood here as feminist literature, as this is a notion that is definitely bound to time and place – meaning that all sorts of definitions or ideas as to what feminist literature entails exist. Feminist literature is undoubtedly tied to feminism, for which the political roots “lie in the struggle for equal civil and political right for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Felski 12) and this is irrevocably part of the essence of feminist literature. Felski says that “[t]he variety of feminist positions makes it difficult to establish absolute and unambiguous criteria for determining what constitutes a feminist narrative” (13). She explains that feminist texts are often woman-centred, but that woman-centred texts are not always or directly feminist (13-14). Maria Lauret explains in “Seizing Time and Making New: Feminist Criticism, Politics and Contemporary Feminist Fiction” that there is no visibly unified women’s movement and adds to this that “[i]f there are now many feminisms, many types of feminist criticism (even if the divisions are less rigid than the-state-of-feminist-criticism-now-

type articles tend to suggest) there are also many different possible feminist readings of the same novel (97-8). Hence, as different aspects can be read as being feminist and thus can cause all kinds of works of fiction to be regarded as feminist literature, the line has to be drawn somewhere with regard to what definition is used and what aspects should be taken into account concerning that specific definition.

An important aspect in feminist literature is a focus on the roles of men and women and on their position in society. One of the very first definitions of feminist literature I encountered, while simultaneously one of the few clearly stated ones, is the one presented on *Wikipedia*, which states that: “[feminist literature] often identifies women's roles as unequal to those of men – particularly as regards status, privilege and power – and generally portrays the consequences to women, men, families, communities and societies as undesirable.” The main aspects mentioned here tie in with the definition given by Felski, as she argues that feminist literature presents inequality between the sexes while simultaneously creating “a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position” (14). The presentation of inequality between the sexes is an aspect many have pointed out when discussing feminist (dystopian) literature. For example, the earlier provided analyses by Cavalcanti and Jones indicate a focus in this type of fiction on inequality between the sexes with regard to domination and oppression. Women are in the subordinate position in Gilead society, as most of the basic rights they used to have in their ‘before-life’ have been taken away and their main role is now to serve society, for which they receive titles like ‘handmaiden’ or ‘Aunt.’ Cavalcanti and Jones also highlight a difference between the sexes and this difference seems essential to their argument that the novel presents feminist dystopian fiction. Although Cavalcanti and Jones do not define feminist fiction like Felski does, the aspects they highlight do seem to tie in with what Felski argues. The presentation of inequality between the sexes, while simultaneously placing women in the subordinate position, could – especially in dystopian fiction – serve as an element of warning so as to signal how a certain type of society is undesirable and should be avoided.

All five novels, so *The Handmaid’s Tale* included, present a society in which inequality between the sexes exists. In four of the five novels, namely *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Future Home of the Living God*, *The Carhullan Army*, and *Gather the Daughters*, there is not only inequality, but women are also the sex that is in the subordinate position. There is a clear division between men and women, as the lives of women appear to be under more direct threat. The totalitarian government or the authorities are primarily concerned with controlling

the lives of women, which results in a world in which women have some (if not all) of their basic rights taken away. This is not only due to there being a new (often totalitarian) government or authority, but also due to the focus on reproduction. Women's lives are being controlled either because their reproduction is regulated or because, as in *Gather the Daughters*, their reproductive organs control what their life looks like.

This does not mean that men do not at all suffer the consequences of the authorities under which they live. However, although some men are not content with the authorities either, such as Janey's and Vanessa's fathers in *Gather the Daughters*, the group of men living with the women in *The Carhullan Army*, and male relatives or close relations in *Future Home of the Living God*, their lives are not under direct threat. In all these novels it is obvious that the aim of the men close to the narrators is to either help them escape or to help them fight, which indicates there is inequality between the sexes, as women need help and need protection from the authorities and men (and also women who need not fear, such as those who are past fertility in *Future Home of the Living God*) support the rebellious acts. In all novels the rebellion rises out of discontent and objection – implying that the societies presented in the novels are not admirable and will only cause disruption. Hence, all the novels present narratives in which inequality between the sexes exist, in which women are in subordinate positions, and which simultaneously shows the consequences for society. This indicates that these four novels can be defined as feminist fiction on the basis of the definition provided earlier *and* it shows their ties with *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Alderman's *The Power* does not as easily fit the framework set up by the definition. The novel does present inequality between the sexes, but it differs in that the inequality is reversed. Women have almost full control due to their powers and men suffer the consequences as a result of that. Women have taken control in this dystopian world. Whereas some want to use their power to, in their view, better the world (Eve) or to help those who are weaker (Roxy), there are also instances of rape and abuse. It happens to one of Roxy's brothers, but also to Tunde when he is trying to hide on a rooftop and a woman discovers him:

“[s]he has him on the ground now; she is wrestling with his belt and his jeans. She's trying to pull them down without undoing the buckle, and they're too tight to come over his hips. His back is scraping on the gravel; he can feel the edge of a wet concrete block in the small of his back, rubbing him raw, and he keeps thinking if I fight her off

too hard she'll knock me unconscious, and then she can do whatever she wants”
(Alderman 138).

Although women are not in the subordinate position in this novel, this novel can still be said to be feminist, which can be best explained through Alderman's own commentary on it. She says in an interview with Ruth La Ferla for the *New York Times* that “I hoped at least at the outset it would be good for women to feel or imagine what it would be like to be in a position of control. It's always nice to have a little peek and see how society would look from the other side” – indicating that ‘the other side’ is the side women are not on in the world as we know it. Furthermore, she states the importance of Tunde's story in the novel when she says that “[h]is story is the story about how a man in a world run by women learns how women have felt in a world run by men, living among wandering sadists, people who turn violent just because they can.” All in all, she indicates that the world presented in *The Power* is a world that subverts conventional power positions, which can be read as critical commentary on the role and position of women in our current societies. That the novel can be read as a reversal of the roles signals that we live in a world that knows this type of violence and this distribution of power over the sexes, but the other way around. Hence, the novel can be read as feminist fiction in that it critically comments on current events and societies with regard to both the distribution of power amongst the sexes and the position of women as a result of that. By creating a world as disturbed as ours, but now the other sex is to blame, the idea is created that we do not need any kind of inequality but simply equality.

I have shown that all four novels fit the framework of feminist fiction while clearly portraying dystopian worlds. Most importantly, the feminist features form part of the dystopian world. The element of warning is not only directed at creating awareness concerning what could happen when a totalitarian authority were to take over, but is also directed at creating awareness concerning the roles of women. All novels display that a society in which one sex is directly deprived of their freedom, a basic human right, or in which the body seems to belong more to the community than to themselves strongly goes against the beliefs most people have in this day and age. Whether they all as strongly critically comment on current circumstances as *The Power* does is a type of analysis I cannot provide here, as that would require more research. What can be said is that all five novels present dystopian worlds that have emerged from a world that is similar to ours, or, as in *Gather the Daughters*, exist in a world next to a society similar to ours. Our world still knows sexism, inequality between the sexes and amongst races, and we are not free from dictators who have

strict control over their citizens. It is never guaranteed that these speculative dystopian worlds cannot arise, which might signal the relevance of the element of warning. Nonetheless, as long as there are people willing to form a rebellion against the oppression or as long as there are people who dare think against the grain, there is hope.

Genre.

I have shown in this chapter that there is a link between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the four novels of which my corpus is composed. They all share similar internal features which can be analysed as feminist dystopian fiction. The idea that works within a genre share similar features but are not exactly the same on all grounds has been confirmed and it seems best to speak of these works as 'relatives' and as having 'family resemblances' – implying they are similar but not identical. These novels represent a cluster that needs a label that is more specific than merely 'dystopian fiction.' The role of *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be the one of pioneer or touchstone for these other works of fiction, as it is clear that the fiction presented by the four novels of which my corpus is composed is similar to the fiction presented in Atwood's novel. *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Future Home of the Living God*, *The Carhullan Army* and *Gather the Daughters* all present a dystopian world in which authorities are concerned with controlling the lives of its citizens and in which primarily women and their reproductive organs are under strict rule. The one novel that most strongly deviates from the rest is *The Power*, as it does not present a dystopian world in which women are in the subordinate position, but one in which men are. Because all five novels are dystopias, the type of society that is portrayed is clearly presented as unpleasant. These are the main features the novels share and on the basis of the provided analysis it can be concluded that this can be labelled as feminist dystopian fiction.

This means that this group of fiction should then be grouped under genre fiction, as it can be labelled via the use of genre(s). Although I could conclude with that, I do feel it is necessary to shortly elaborate on this distinction between literary and genre fiction. I established in chapter one that the division of literature into either literary fiction or genre fiction attaches a type of value or status to a work – at least, to some. Will Norman explains in his discussion of Martin Amis's *Night Train* (1997) that “[l]iterary fiction, to use Bourdieu's terminology, is a category of legitimate culture in that it positions itself hierarchically within the cultural field in opposition to other categories—typically mass-market genre fiction” (38)

– implying that literary fiction is often regarded as a more highbrow type of fiction than genre fiction. However, if we look at my discussion of the five novels that can be labelled under the generic term feminist dystopian fiction, it becomes clear that genre fiction does not necessarily have little value. Especially *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* can be said to be politically and culturally involved, as their narratives can be seen as indirect critical commentary on current events in the world. Although I have not analysed the other novels as such, because they can be seen as feminist literature due to the features they present rather than by analysing a deeper meaning or message that could be read within these works, that these novels can be seen as feminist fiction implies there are always certain political, cultural and/or social ties. These novels are undoubtedly genre fiction in that they can be labelled in generic terms, but it is essential to highlight that this does not automatically mean that they are mass-market fiction to which little or no value can be attached.

I have now come to the conclusion that this group of fiction, of which *The Handmaid's Tale* is the pioneer, can be said to be presenting narratives that can be labelled as feminist dystopian fiction. This is, however, based on analysis of reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* and on an analysis of the novels that have been linked to it. What has not yet been taken into account, aside from the fact that some critics have mentioned *The Handmaid's Tale* in their reviews of the novels, is the field itself. The question remains how the field has dealt with these works with regard to (generic) labelling. I encountered that some critics use *The Handmaid's Tale* so as to give an indication of what can be expected of the novel that is under discussion. It has, however, not been analysed if some do speak of feminist dystopias and when they do, how they use the term. Is it called a (sub)genre? Are characteristics being discussed when speaking of this type of fiction? Do they conform to the idea of what has been analysed as the subgenre feminist dystopia in this chapter? Therefore, the following chapter will focus more closely on how critics and publishers have dealt with these novels.

Chapter four: Recognition by the Field

In this chapter I will look more closely at both critics and publishers with regard to how they have dealt with the four novels of which my corpus is composed. What has been said in reviews by critics and what have publishers used to promote these works? What type of label or framework is used and how frequently does *The Handmaid's Tale* play a role in this? Can we speak of the subgenre feminist dystopia as acknowledged by the field or has it not (yet) been fully recognised?

In the literary field all kinds of actors influence a novel. Important aspects are the reception and promotion of a work. Therefore, my focus will be on professional critics and publishers. I have explained in chapter one that genre is a social act, which means stating that a new (sub)genre has come into existence via close analysis of a group of novels is not sufficient. It is necessary that the field, so, for example, critics and publishers, acknowledge that something is happening in the field and that a new (sub)genre is needed for a group of fiction that shows a particular combination of features. I chose to focus on professional critics, because their evaluation of a work is one of the very first informative evaluations, while also public and with a wide range. By professional critics I mean critics writing for newspapers, magazines, professional weblogs, or online news platforms who receive money for their work. Critics read, summarise, analyse, and evaluate a novel so as to give an indication of what can be expected of the work to anyone who reads their review. Publishers, on the other hand, use all kinds of information to promote the work they publish. For example, a publisher can choose to place focus on the prizes the novel has won or on the kind of commentary it has received by critics. I already established that critics have linked the four novels of which my corpus is composed to *The Handmaid's Tale* and I have argued that we are dealing with a group of fiction that needs to be labelled as feminist dystopian fiction. However, I am now interested to see whether or not critics have labelled these works as such in their reviews as well. Furthermore, I will look at how publishers have labelled the work and whether or not they use specific review extracts to do this.

Critics.

I will begin by looking at what critics say about the four novels and what type of labels they use to classify them. I chose to look for reviews on *LexisNexis Academic*, as this is a platform where I am able to find a large number of reviews in newspapers, magazines or weblogs. I looked up all four novels by searching for “‘novel’s name’ author’s name” and then clicked

through all the hits. I read all the articles and saved all reviews or articles in which the novel was under discussion and also being labelled in any way. My main focus was on reviews on the novels, but if I came across an article in which one (or several) of the novels were discussed and simultaneously labelled I also included these. All articles were only saved once, which means that an article that I found several times in different newspapers or articles that contain discussion of several of the novels have only been saved once. The number of articles I eventually included are: 55 for *The Power*, 35 for *Future Home of the Living God*, 18 for *Gather the Daughters*, and 26 for *The Carhullan Army* – making a total of 134 articles. I will now discuss the findings that are of direct importance to this thesis and to my previous analysis of the novels as feminist dystopias.

Quantitative results

I read all the articles and counted the labels I came across. Aside from the ones I incorporated in the tables below, as these are more directly relevant for this research, I also came across labels as ‘thriller’, broader genre labels as ‘speculative fiction’ and ‘science fiction’, and even quite specific labels, such as “futuristic eco-fable” (Kidd) as a label used for *The Carhullan Army*. The numbers in the tables are not based on how often I counted a label but represent the number of articles in which I came across a label. So, for example, if the word ‘dystopia’ was used several times in an article I only counted it once. Table one shows the number of articles in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* or Atwood was mentioned as touchstone. In articles in which *The Power* was discussed Atwood was often mentioned as Alderman’s mentor. These references I did not include, as they do not serve to show a comparison between the two authors or their works.

Table 1

Number of articles in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* is mentioned.

	Total articles	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> or Atwood mentioned
<i>Gather the Daughters</i>	18	15
<i>The Carhullan Army</i>	26	9
<i>The Power</i>	55	27
<i>Future Home of the Living God</i>	35	18

The table shows that in more than half of the articles critics mention either *The Handmaid’s Tale* or Atwood in order to make a comparison or to directly link to novel that is under

discussion to Atwood and her work. One critic speaks of “Margaret Atwood's genre-defining novel” (Scholes) – indicating that Atwood’s work indeed has set some form of example and serves as a sort of framework for these four novels. Many refer to *The Handmaid’s Tale* by making a statement such as ‘X bears resemblance to Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, but some also specifically refer to the incorporation of a totalitarian government and/or to the focus on women’s reproductive rights in the novel that is under discussion. That *The Handmaid’s Tale* is used so often as example or as work to which the novel under discussion is compared signals that the role of Atwood’s work is indeed significant. Critics seem to acknowledge that Atwood has set an example with *The Handmaid’s Tale* with regard to the type of fiction it presents and the features it contains but sometimes also with regard to what can be read into it and the message the novel conveys.

Aside from the focus on Atwood and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I was interested in the type of labels critics use in their discussions of the novels. I came across several types of labels, but have narrowed down my main findings to the labels most important for this thesis. Table two, three, and four show how often I counted the labels ‘dystopia(n)’, ‘feminist’, and ‘feminist dystopia’.

Table 2

Number of articles in which the novels are labelled as dystopian.

	Total articles	Label dystopia(n)
<i>Gather the Daughters</i>	18	14
<i>The Carhullan Army</i>	26	15
<i>The Power</i>	55	22
<i>Future Home of the Living God</i>	35	27

Table 3

Number of articles in which the novels are labelled as feminist.

	Total articles	Label feminist
<i>Gather the Daughters</i>	18	3
<i>The Carhullan Army</i>	26	5
<i>The Power</i>	55	16
<i>Future Home of the Living God</i>	35	6

Table 4

Number of articles in which the novels are labelled as feminist dystopia.

	Total articles	Label feminist dystopia
Gather the Daughters	18	1
The Carhullan Army	26	1
The Power	55	2
Future Home of the Living God	35	4

In some articles the critic mentions both that the novel presents a dystopia and that it is a feminist novel, but s/he does not explicitly say that the novel that is under discussion is a feminist dystopia. This explains why the numbers concerning the label ‘feminist dystopia’ differ strongly from the numbers in the other two tables. I should also note that the ‘feminist’ in feminist dystopia and the ‘dystopia’ in feminist dystopia were not counted once for the label ‘feminist dystopia’ but twice, as I also incorporated them as separate labels – meaning they are also included in table two and three.

In some reviews the critic does not explicitly use the labels dystopian fiction or feminist fiction but does indirectly refer to it. If it was clear to me that the critic meant to refer to either one of these labels, I still counted the label as being used. Laura Freeman, for example, says that “[i]n these futuro-utero-dystopias tyrannical governments seize the means of reproduction, and mothers and children, those most vulnerable of groups, fight for their lives” after which she names several other novels and then introduces *Future Home of the Living God* as follows: “[n]ow, in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, set in a near-future America, evolution has ended.” I read this as Freeman placing the novel in a tradition by introducing it as such. Hence, I counted it as a label being placed upon the work, because the comparison indicates that what is said about the novels used as example counts for the novel that is under discussion. Another example of a similar situation was: “[a]part from true accounts, feminist dystopias can also supply alternative ways of looking at the sexism that has been so rampant in our daily lives that it has become too difficult to unpick” (Ho). I read this as Ho indicating that the novel, which is *The Power*, is part of this group of fiction (the feminist dystopia), as she places it within a framework through such a statement.

Qualitative results

What immediately became clear as I was reading all the reviews is that indeed all sorts of genres exist and that each critic can have his or her own ideas as to what label seems more suitable. Some use broader generic terms such as science fiction or speculative fiction, while others use generic labels that are more specific, such as thriller, dystopia, or even feminist dystopia. Nonetheless, none of the critics use a label that is entirely unexpected. Science fiction and speculative fiction are by some seen as interchangeable and dystopian fiction is seen as a subgenre of these broader genres. This also shows that several types of genres can apply to a novel, as the novels are both science fiction / speculative fiction, dystopian fiction, feminist fiction, but some are also, for example, thrillers. None of these labels is less accurate to use than any of the others.

The idea that different types of genres are suitable for a work is also visible in what types of labels are used. This is apparent in how often *The Power* is labelled as feminist science fiction instead of as feminist dystopia. Whereas the label ‘feminist dystopia’ is used twice, the label ‘feminist science fiction’ is used ten times. Some of these critics label the novel as both a feminist sci-fi novel and as dystopian fiction, which indicates that they do regard the novel as a dystopia. Why they chose to label the work as a feminist sci-fi rather than as a feminist dystopia is a question I can hardly answer. It might be that one critic used the label first and that others followed or it might be that they regard the ‘umbrella’ genre sci-fi as more accurate than its subgenre dystopian fiction. Nonetheless, the novel has been labelled as feminist and both the overarching genre and one of its subgenres are used in combination with this – neither of which are less accurate.

Furthermore, table two shows substantial difference in use of the label ‘feminist’ between Alderman’s *The Power* and the other three novels. Why there is such a clear difference between *The Power* and the other three novels might be due to Alderman’s own statements concerning the novel and its message. As I have shown in chapter two, Alderman has spoken out in interviews on what she is trying to show and what the aim and message of her novel are. For example, she often talks about feminism: “[w]hen I was a teenager in the 1990s, it was a common thing among young women to say that feminism's battles are won. Now I think it's very horrifically obvious that that is not the case” (La Ferla). Statements like the one presented here and the ones presented in chapter three indicate what she tried to write into the novel and what can thus be read into it – and most critics have used that in their reviews on the novel. Whereas Alderman highlights the feminist aspects in her novel, the other three authors have not done this. Only Hall has spoken out about feminism, but not

because she feels her work is specifically feminist or should be labelled as such. She primarily discusses feminism with regard to the characters she presents, such as Jackie, and how they represent a specific group of feminists. Interestingly, some critics have highlighted the feminist aspects in Hall's characters, just like she has. This indicates that the role of the author cannot be underestimated when it concerns the critic's discussion of a novel and that they can influence the type of label placed upon their work.

Overall, the novels are more often being labelled as dystopian fiction than as feminist fiction. Nonetheless, all the novels have been labelled as feminist fiction, which indicates that some critics do explicitly state that they regard the novel under discussion as feminist literature, which confirms the findings of my previous chapter. They barely state, however, why they believe the novels are feminist. An explanation for this difference between the number of times the label 'dystopian' is used and the number of times 'feminist' has been may be ascribed to recognition by the field. Dystopian fiction is seen as a subgenre in its own right and it has been known as a generic label for quite some time. It is also easier to label a work as dystopian fiction, as there are quite clear features that belong to this subgenre. Calling a work feminist might be a more difficult task to do, especially for a professional critic who is primarily concerned with informing and evaluating and does not very often elaborate through extensive analysis of a work – which, I believe, is needed when discussing these novels as feminist literature. Professional critics are pressured into writing a review with a limited number of words and within a limited amount of time. In the previous chapter I explained the difficulty of labelling works as feminist due to the variety of feminist positions and the ensuing difficulty to determine and define what a feminist narrative constitutes (Felski 13). Hence, it may be that critics refrain from labelling these works as feminist literature, as that would likely need more analysis or explanation. A label like 'dystopian fiction' does not necessarily need further explanation, as the definition of dystopian fiction is more definite and fixed. Whereas critics often cannot or choose not to elaborate, academics *can* elaborate on a discussion as to whether or not these novels could be read as feminist, but the academic realm has not yet taken notice of these novels.

Regarding the recognition of the feminist dystopia as genre by the field, I came across one particularly important article by Vanessa Thorpe. I shortly discussed this article in the introduction and it is of importance because it shows that the feminist dystopia as genre is not entirely unfamiliar in and to the field. While discussing *The Carhullan Army* Thorpe states that “[w]hen the *Guardian* reviewed *The Carhullan Army* it dismissed women's dystopian

fiction as a ‘low-key subgenre’. Not anymore. Feminist dystopias, long established in a shady nook of the publishing industry, are now out there shaping the zeitgeist”, to which she adds that “[t]hese works are no longer oddities found lurking next to the teen vampire shelves of the bookshop or tucked by the academic essays, they are bathed in full cultural sunlight.” She then discusses Alderman’s *The Power*, which not only shows she labels both these works as feminist dystopias, but she also links the two to each other. Although not many have incorporated a discussion as the one presented by Thorpe about whether or not the feminist dystopia is a genre and how minor or fully-fledged it is, this type of discussion does show the feminist dystopia is not an entirely unacknowledged (sub)genre.

Furthermore, Thorpe states that feminist dystopias are shaping the zeitgeist. Although not all critics label the novels as feminist dystopias, they do often discuss the contemporary relevance of the novels. Alderman’s *The Power* is often brought into relation with the #MeToo movement and the situation involving Harvey Weinstein’s practices. For example: “*The Power* is unintentionally timely. It was written before #MeToo, before Harvey Weinstein and his sorry band of brothers seized public consciousness - but, of course, it could never not be timely” (Sutcliffe). What is interesting about *The Carhullan Army* is that it was published in 2007. A review from 2007 addresses its relevance in relation to floods that had occurred at the time by saying that “AFTER the recent disastrous floods, this novel is well timed” (Colvin). Richard Lea, however, whose review is from 2017 states: “[t]he casual brutality of Sarah Hall’s faceless Authority, the grey despair of the browbeaten citizens seemed reassuringly remote in 2007. But in the world of Brexit and Donald Trump, the novel’s bleak near-future setting seems dangerously close.” This indicates that whereas in 2007 the novel was linked to an, at the time, recent happening, it is still linked to current events ten years later. Two novels that have not been analysed as ‘timely’ – at least, compared to the two I just mentioned – are *Gather the Daughters* and *Future Home of the Living God*. Melamed’s *Gather the Daughters* is not discussed as a timely novel and, especially compared to the other novels, not as often brought into relation with contemporary society. Nonetheless, one critic says that “[a]t a time when it feels as if women’s rights around the world are being slowly eroded this absorbing novel is both gripping and to-the-bone chilling. Melamed is definitely a talent to watch” (Gilmore). *Future Home of the Living God* is not directly linked to a recent event in the world, but it is at times addressed that it is timely or that “Louise Erdrich sets her 16th novel in the United States, but its First World setting feels like this could happen anywhere - or perhaps it is happening already” (Lock). All in all, this indicates that

the four novels not only have in common that they can be compared to *The Handmaid's Tale* or that they can be labelled as feminist, as dystopian fiction, even as feminist dystopian fiction, but also that they can be said to be relevant concerning contemporary society and/or can be related to current events.

Now that I know what critics have said about these novels and how they have labelled the works – both through the use of genres and by making comparisons with well-known and popular works, I will look more closely at how publishers have labelled the works. I will look at the novel's covers and their individual pages on the publishing houses' websites and will primarily focus on the summaries of the novels and the review extracts that are presented.

Publishers.

Although economic profit is not the only thing at stake when a new novel is published, it is nonetheless of great importance to many of the actors involved in the book business. Various actors, like the publisher or the bookseller, will be concerned with selling the work – for which certain labels can be useful. Juliet Gardner explains the importance of genre and says that from the author's point of view genre serves as a jacket that represents “the interior of the book: its content, what has been written - as far as possible its unique nature” and that the publisher, on the other hand, “insists that it is the book's circulation that must be represented - its destination - the market it is to find by analogy with books of the same genre, the futurity of its appeal” (qtd. in Squires 76). A way to do this could be to label works via generic terms, as a type of label could help the novel's promotion by attracting a specific audience – especially if the work can be labelled as belonging to a group of fiction that has proven to be a popular type of fiction that sells well this is attractive to publishers. Genres form these labels, as they classify a work and signal to all the possible readers (and simultaneously buyers) out there what can and what cannot be expected of a novel.

I looked at the website of the four publishing houses in order to come to an understanding as to what they use to promote these four novels. The four publishing houses are Tinder Press, Little, Brown and Company, Faber & Faber, and HarperCollins. On all four websites the novels have their own separate page on which prizes the novels have won or have been shortlisted for are listed, a short summary of the novel is given, and in two cases review extracts are presented. On the covers of these four novels we also find the prizes they

have won, a short summary, and review extracts. Before discussing what types of quotes by critics are presented, I will first discuss how the publishing house chose to present and summarise the novel in their own words.

It is interesting to see that each of the publishing houses presents the work under their production in their own manner. Faber & Faber do not label *The Carhullan Army* specifically on their website. The summary is short and to the point – by which I mean to say that it only concerns what is presented in the novel and no further generic label is attached to that. HarperCollins, on the other hand, do attach a generic label to *Future Home of the Living God* when they present it as:

“[a] chilling dystopian novel both provocative and prescient, *Future Home of the Living God* is a startlingly original work from one of our most acclaimed writers: a moving meditation on female agency, self-determination, biology, and natural rights that speaks to the troubling changes of our time.”

Little, Brown and Company are the only publishing house of these four who give a list of genres under which their novel can be grouped. It is said that *The Power* is Sci-Fi & Fantasy, Fiction, Science Fiction, Apocalyptic & Post-apocalyptic. Furthermore, they say it is “speculative fiction at its most ambitious and provocative, at once taking us on a thrilling journey to an alternate reality, and exposing our own world in bold and surprising ways.” Tinder Press, the publishing house under which Jennie Melamed writes, has not labelled *Gather the Daughters* in any particular way, aside from the short mention that the novel is “For fans of Emma Cline’s *THE GIRLS* and Emily St John Mandel’s *STATION 11*” – which is a link with fairly recent works of fiction, rather than a comparison with a more widely known work like *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It shows that each of the publishing houses has their own way of promoting a work: three of the four novels are shaped through a type of labelling – whether that is through using a generic label or by linking the novel to other works.

Nonetheless, the main form of labelling is presented through review extracts. As the aim is, of course, to promote the works, all the quotes that are shown on the website and on the covers of the novels only praise the novel; there is no criticism. There is no section with critical praise on the pages of *The Carhullan Army* and *Gather the Daughters*, but there is on the pages of *The Power* and *Future Home of the Living God*. Because these are quite long lists that contain almost any form of praise, I have chosen to look more closely at the covers of the novels, as publishers have to choose which specific reviews extracts to present there. Numerous praising quotes can be added to the website page, but there is only room for a limited number of quotes on the cover of a novel.

It is striking that the four novels all contain quite different type of quotes on their covers. The least conspicuous novel with regard to use of review extracts for generic labelling is *Gather the Daughters*, as the only quote that is presented on its cover is one by Kate Hamer who praises the work but does not label it in any particular way. Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* does contain more extracts – namely two instead of one – but is only labelled in one through a comparison with Toni Morrison, Tolstoy, and Steinbeck. The comparison is, however, aimed at how Erdrich writes her characters and not at the type of fiction that is presented. The only form of generic labelling that can be found on the cover is that the novel is called a dystopian thriller in the novel's summary, which is the same summary as the one on the website. The review extracts presented on the novel's cover differ from the ones presented on the novel's website page, as the page contains quotes in which Erdrich's work is labelled more specifically as: dystopian, speculative fiction, and as thriller. There is even a quote in which the novel is compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*. It might be that these quotes were added after the novel was published, which would explain their absence on the cover and their presence on the website.

Two novels whose covers are fairly similar with regard to generic labelling are *The Power* and *The Carhullan Army*. *The Power*'s cover contains a quote by Atwood on the front – which is not unexpected, as Atwood was Alderman's mentor – and also a quote from the *Cosmopolitan* in which it is said that the novel is a combination of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*. Also, in the review extracts that are presented the novel is labelled as a thriller. Interestingly, this is the only generic label to be found and no other labels are presented on the novel's cover. On the website, however, all sorts of labels can be found in the presented list of review extracts. It shows the diversity of the novel as all sorts of genres seem suitable – among which is also the feminist dystopia – and the publisher clearly does not shy away from listing them all through the use of critics. Why the label 'thriller' was used instead of any of the other for the novel's cover is a question I cannot answer, as I would need to do more research. It is, however, noteworthy that for both *The Power* and *The Carhullan Army* the publishing houses decided to only present one generic label on their covers. Whereas *The Power* is only labelled as thriller on its cover, *The Carhullan Army* is only labelled as (futuristic) dystopia. Furthermore, *The Carhullan Army* is, like *The Power*, compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*. So, both these novels are being labelled through review extracts in which a generic label is placed upon the work but also through comparison with *The Handmaid's Tale* (and even *The Hunger Games*).

The covers of both these novels clearly signal to the public what type of ‘jacket’ – to refer back to Gardner – the two are wearing. This places the works in the market and may attract a specific audience, namely the kind that is interested in works like *The Handmaid’s Tale* (and *The Hunger Games*). Those who know the works that are used as comparison and enjoy the type of fiction they present might be more tempted to buy the novel now that it is directly linked to it. The generic labels ‘thriller’ and ‘(futuristic) dystopia’ are further additions that signal what type of fiction is presented and what can be expected of these works – as not only the publishing houses but even critics have labelled it as such. I do not know the exact effects of this type of labelling and will also not delve into it, but it is interesting to see that publishing houses do not only use genres to label a work but also use other well-known or popular works. *The Handmaid’s Tale* has proven to be of great importance for these novels, as not only critics use Atwood’s work to make a comparison but publishers actively use the novel for the promotion of their works as well.

What can be concluded at this point is that for all novels – except perhaps for *Gather the Daughters* – it can be said that the publisher has labelled the work under its production through the use of genre and sometimes through the use of other known works. Also, the genres used for labelling are the same critics use in their discussion of the novels. What has overall become clear is that all sorts of genres are suitable for these novels, which reinforces the idea that a novel never belongs to only one genre, as it can contain all sorts of features that can be part of more than one genre. Simultaneously, it shows that generic boundaries are not fixed. Whereas some critics prefer to speak of science fiction or dystopian fiction, others prefer to speak of speculative fiction. Especially science fiction and speculative fiction are often used interchangeably, which shows the overlap these genres have and the possibility for both the critic and the publisher to use either one or both of these labels while not giving the novel a less accurate type of ‘jacket’ to wear. Whereas publishing houses themselves clearly try to only use one type of generic label in their discussion or summary of the novel, they do incorporate all sorts of quotes by critics who *do* use a variety of generic labels. Some of these extracts do not even specifically laud the novel but only label it or elaborate on its incorporation of a variety of genres, which, apparently, is also interesting for the publisher, as it is decided to present these quotes either on the cover of the novel or on its website page.

Lastly, I should return to the question whether or not the feminist dystopia has been acknowledged by the field. I can conclude that the feminist dystopia has been acknowledged by the field, but not entirely. Critics do not often mention the combination of these two types of fiction as one label, by which I mean: critics say a work is feminist and that it presents

dystopian fiction, but take these as separate labels rather than as one. This indicates that critics do regard the novels to present both feminist and dystopian fiction but do not specifically say that they are feminist dystopias. This might indicate that the feminist dystopia as a combined generic label is not yet fully acknowledged, as the number of times a critic uses this as generic label is limited. Nonetheless, there is discussion amongst professional critics about the feminist dystopia as a genre, which shows it is moving out of the realm of academic journals and that it is definitely being acknowledged by some – even when they regard it as a minor genre. The four novels that I analysed as feminist dystopias have been acknowledged by some critics as such, but I do not feel justified in speaking of a fully-fledged genre when it has not been acknowledged as a generic label by more than a handful of critics. Recognition with regard to genre is reflected in how often it is used by critics and publishers. This chapter has shown that the use of ‘feminist dystopia’ as a generic label by professional critics and publishers is limited, which leads me to conclude that feminist dystopian fiction has not yet been fully recognised as a literary (sub)genre by the field.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to establish whether or not feminist dystopian fiction can be classified as a distinct literary (sub)genre. As my research corpus, I chose the following contemporary novels: *Gather The Daughters*, *The Power*, *Future Home of the Living God*, and *The Carhullan Army*. I founded my research on the idea that genre is never fixed, as it is part of the literary field which is always and constantly in motion. As it is part of this field, this research would not have sufficed if I had only analysed novels and concluded on the basis of the shared (combination of) internal features that a new (sub)genre has come into existence. Hence, I have not only looked at the internal features of a group of novels, but have also incorporated the importance of recognition by the field by looking at reviews by professional critics and the types of labels used by the publishing houses by which the novels have been published. One of my main sources was Claire Squires' *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*, as her work gives insight into the importance of genre in and to the marketplace. What can be concluded is that on the basis of the analysis of the internal features we may refer to a new (sub)genre while this cannot legitimately be said on the basis of the analysis of how the field has dealt with this type of fiction.

A novel that has been of importance to this research is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as one of my hypotheses was that the novel plays an essential role in defining feminist dystopian fiction. This hypothesis has been confirmed, as I have shown in chapter two that Atwood's novel has actively been labelled as (re)presenting feminist dystopian fiction – which is a trend that started in the academic realm and moved to the literary field – and that the novel now often serves as touchstone for contemporary novels in reviews by professional critics. By comparing *The Handmaid's Tale* to the four novels of which my corpus is composed, I established that all five novels share similar and crucial defining features and that they all conform to the definitions of both feminist and dystopian fiction. The combination of these two types of fiction forms the feminist dystopia, which is a type of fiction that can best be defined as the presentation of a dystopian world in which the role of women is moved to the foreground and through which consequences for society become visible. An important aspect of the feminist dystopia is the element of warning, as it can often be seen as reflecting on society as we know it. What can be concluded on the basis of chapter two and three is that *The Handmaid's Tale* and the four novels of which my corpus is composed share specific internal features that can be comprehended as comprising feminist dystopian fiction.

Chapter four was focused on the ways in which the field has dealt with these novels and whether or not the feminist dystopia is recognised as a (sub)genre. On the basis of a close analysis of 134 professional reviews in newspapers, weblogs, magazines, and online news platforms I can conclude that all four novels are most often labelled as dystopian fiction, that some critics also add the label feminist literature to that term, but that few use the term ‘feminist dystopia’ in their discussion of the novels. There are a few critics who label the works as both dystopian and feminist fiction but they use these as two separate labels, rather than as one all-encompassing generic label. Nonetheless, there is discussion amongst some critics as to whether or not we should think of the feminist dystopia as a minor subgenre or as a fully-fledged genre, which indicates the generic label is not entirely unfamiliar to the field and is acknowledged by some. The publishing houses, however, do not label the novels as feminist dystopias but do sometimes use review extracts in which critics label it as such. All in all, if I look at my results with regard to recognition by the field, it seems that we cannot speak of the feminist dystopia as a genre just yet. Acknowledgement by the field is of great importance where genre is concerned and on the basis of what I encountered in chapter four it has to be concluded that the feminist dystopia is not yet used by critics and publishers as a generic label. The feminist dystopia still needs to gain in recognition and needs to be acknowledged by the field to such an extent that it is no longer a point of discussion whether it is a fully-fledged genre or not.

What I have shown in this thesis is the importance of both internal features and external recognition in discussing and analysing genres. My contribution to the field lies in my analysis of the novels of which my corpus is composed, as no academic attention has been paid to them yet. I have shown how these novels can be analysed as presenting feminist dystopian fiction and that Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* plays an important role in this. The importance of Atwood’s work is unquestionably acknowledged by the field in the amount of attention it has received, and still receives, and the number of times it serves as example for contemporary works. Furthermore, this is the first research that set out the answer the question whether we can speak of feminist dystopian fiction as a (sub)genre. It is a frequently used label – perhaps more prominently in the academic realm than in the literary field – but it has never before been researched whether, on the basis of internal features and external recognition, it could be regarded as a (sub)genre or not.

With regard to possibilities for future research it would above all be important to include more novels and to see whether they can be analysed as presenting feminist dystopian fiction as well. If more novels are included and if they, in addition to that, fit the generic

framework of feminist dystopian fiction, my analysis that there is a group of works that present a particular and unique combination of internal features can be confirmed more strongly. Also, the more attention this type of fiction receives, the more likely it may be that it can actually become a fully-fledged and acknowledged genre, as further analyses might lead to the recognition it needs. This could then serve as basis for more substantial questions relating to our society, as it would become almost inevitable to ask 'why now?' and to research the cultural context in which these novels exist and in which the (sub)genre has come into existence.

Appendix A

Short summary of the novels of which my corpus is composed will be provided here.

Future Home of the Living God by Louise Erdrich.

Throughout this novel we follow Cedar Songmaker, who has been adopted by a pair of Minneapolis liberals and is now looking for her birth mother Mary Potts. As she is trying to find out where her roots lie, her future becomes less stable by the day. This is because Cedar is pregnant in a world in which evolution has reversed itself. As more women are given birth to children that are primitive species of humans, the governmental control tightens. Those who are pregnant are asked to go to a hospital so that they can be monitored. Those who do not go voluntarily, like Cedar, are taken from their homes and sent to the hospital anyway. Few survive their pregnancies, as the bodies of the women do not seem to be able to handle the type of babies they are giving birth to. While society is collapsing and everyone is worrying about what might be the end of humanity, Cedar is bonding with both her birth and her adoptive mother and is trying to escape with help from both her families.

Gather the Daughters by Jennie Melamed.

The story is set on an island off the coast on which a self-sufficient community lives. Their community was formed by a group of men who built their society on a set of strict laws. Only a set of chosen men, called The Wanderers, are allowed to leave the island and to go to what they call the 'wasteland' (the country), knowledge is rationed, breeding is controlled, and the lives of the citizens are entirely planned out. The lives of young girls is completely based on becoming good wives and mothers. Before they reach puberty it is common for their fathers to come into their beds at night, seeking comfort and often also sexual contact. Once the girls' first signs of puberty are showing they are taken from their homes and have to go into training. During their summer of fruition they are matched with a boy and made into wives, when their main purpose becomes to bare children. Once their children have children and the pair is no longer deemed useful to the community they take their final draught and die. A group of young girls, with Janey Solomon as their leader, decides to rebel against this by refraining from their parental home and by refusing to follow the absurd laws any longer. This is when the community becomes disrupted, as not only the children who form the future go

against the community's laws, but more men and women begin to reflect on the foundations on which their community stands.

The Carhullan Army by Sarah Hall.

The story is set in England, but the country is in a state of environmental and economic crisis. There is strict governmental control, as a result of which women of child-bearing age have been fitted with contraceptive devices. The narrator is a young woman, named Sister, who has decided to join a group of women, and a small semi-separate group of men, who have created a self-sufficient community on a remote farm at Carhullan. The community's leader, named Jackie Nixon, is a stern woman who is not afraid to fight the government if she deems it necessary. The women are distributed over groups that take care of one of the tasks that needs to be taken care of in order for the community to remain standing. Whereas all seems peaceful at first, things soon begin to change. When their community appears to come under direct threat by the government, Jackie decides it is time to gather all women and to form an army. A training follows and everyone is prepared for battle. The novel ends soon after the Carhullan army attacks one of the city's that is under the government's control.

The Power by Naomi Alderman

The world that is presented is a world similar to ours, but now women are in control due to their skein having been activated. It is a sort of organ which has always been inside their bodies, but which had not been activated until now. Women have the ability to activate the skein of others and this trend soon causes the world to change. There are several narrators: Allie, Roxy, Margot, and Tunde. Allie is an American foster child who changes her name to Eve and who wants to build a community consisting of only women. Roxy is an English teenager and the daughter of a crime boss. Margot is an American middle-aged woman, a mother, and a politician on the rise. Tunde is a Nigerian journalist who reports on events happening throughout the world, showing primarily the negative sides to this newly bodily power. Through their narratives we see a matriarchal world, as the distribution of power is in favour of women and they are now the leaders of countries, of troops, of religious groups, and more. The gender roles seem to have been reversed, and by abusing their power, women

prove to be just as violent creatures as men had been thought to be in the world they knew before.

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