

Utopia or Dystopia: A Spacial Reading of *Future Home of the Living God*

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ABSTRACT

Future Home of the Living God by Louise Erdrich is set against the backdrop of the human evolution crisis in the future world, and tells the story of Cedar's experience of escaping and giving birth to a child. The novel is generally regarded by critics as a typical dystopian novel. By sorting out the development and characteristics of dystopian novel and illustrate diverse spaces in this novel, this paper holds that this novel not only expresses the dissatisfaction with the social system through dystopian space, but also expounds the author's utopian ideal about the future of the Native American through the metaphor of space. The alienation of daily spaces in the novel, such as communities, homes, hospitals and caves, alludes to social problems such as urban alienation and environmental degradation. Moreover, the writing of "non-places" in the novel triggers readers' thinking about women's rights and moral structure, then reveals the discourse system of dictatorship and despotism. Through the writing of the past and the future, Erdrich tactfully constructs a native utopia in dystopia.

Keywords: *Dystopia, Utopia, Space, Time, Native American.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017, referred to hereafter as *FH*) is set at an indeterminate time in the future. Species evolution suddenly and mysteriously stops, crops fail, animals stop breeding, and fetuses abort. Science cannot stop the world going backwards or even explain what is happening. The protagonist Cedar is adopted by a white family. After pregnancy, she goes to the reservation to look for her biological mother, hoping to learn about her biological parents' family history. A group called the Society for the Protection of Unborn (UPS) is hunting down pregnant women and making them under centralized management. After her unfortunate capture, Cedar manages to escape with the help of her adoptive mother, Sera. They find refuge on the Ojibwe Indian reservation, where the family of Cedar's biological mother live, but Cedar is eventually captured again. At the end of the novel, Cedar gives birth to a baby boy, who is taken away immediately, and she is held in a fertility prison, waiting to be fertilized.

Most scholars think that *FH* is a typical dystopia novel (Athitakis, Mart ínez-Falquina 161),

and Erdrich also spoke openly about the dystopia in the novel (Atwood and Erdrich). Mart ínez-Falquina compares *FH* with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and analyzes the novel's uncertainty from the dystopian model(165). On the run, Cedar and her adoptive mother head north from Minnesota to Canada, trying to find a future home for her baby. Does Canada meet Erdrich's definition of an ideal society? Erdrich did not give a definite answer, but in the interview, she expressed the viewpoint that although the environmental pollution incident in Canada has caused harm to the indigenous people, Canada is generally better than the United States in terms of natural environment and social system "Dear Canada! Please keep fighting to be a liberal democracy—a country who welcomes immigrants and is attempting truth and reconciliation with Native people. We need your example and friendship" (Atwood and Erdrich). It shows Erdrich's expectation of environmental protection and social system in the ideal country and society. This article argues that the novel employs dystopian space to express concerns about social and environmental issues, and constructs the future of Native Americans through utopian imagination. By analyzing various kinds of space in

the novel, it opens the door to connect the imagination of dystopia and utopia, and reveals the relationship between fictional representations and the underlying socio-political issues that drive them.

2. DYSTOPIA, UTOPIA AND NATIVE AMERICAN NOVELS

Dystopia comes from the word utopia, which was invented by Renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More in 1516; dystopia was proposed by John Stuart Mill in 1868. Unlike utopias, where people dream of an ideal society and imagine a better world, a dystopian social system has many negative characteristics, such as tyrannies, environmental disasters and more social decline. In the second half of the 20th century, dystopia replaced utopia as the mainstream.

In *The Concept of Utopia* (1990), Ruth Levitas points out that utopia, as a literary type, contains eutopia and dystopia (246), which are unified and opposite to each other. Levitas analyses the role of utopian function shift in social transformation. She argues, after 1905 utopia abandoned the ideal state that traditionally mimics Plato's ideal process and made the necessary changes. Atwood captures this interaction well, "dystopias are usually described as the opposite of utopias...scratch the surface a little...you see something more like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia" (85). Gregory Claeys, author of *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), also puts forward a similar view. He believes that dystopia is a utopia that has been realized. He stresses that one man's utopia could be another man's dystopia, and vice versa. One might, in fact, see dystopian and utopian visions not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project (Booker 15). The views of the above scholars indicate that utopia and dystopia are closely related, and they can convert to each other at some time.

The works of dystopia present an unpleasant imagined fact. Some of the worrying trends in today's social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future, often in the form of science fiction. The criticism of realistic society and the description of extreme social conditions by the authors of dystopian novels express their concern about social and political issues and distinguish dystopian novel from classic science fiction. Dystopia presents the dark side of society, but still a utopia thought is hidden behind this dystopian cruelty. Palardy points out "even though

literary critics are often discouraged from relying on an author's intentions to guide their interpretation of a text, in the case of literary dystopias the reader must discern the author's attitude in order to fully comprehend the work" (10). In the novel, through the depiction of the unpleasant social landscape, the author expresses her concern about the crisis existing in today's society, meanwhile presents her social imagination.

In the works of dystopia, there are two concepts worth mentioning — "space" and "time". Like utopia, dystopia is concerned with a particular region or place, which represents an ideal, a spirit, or a social problem. *Topos* means "place" in Greek and is part of the concept of dystopia. Space is an important carrier for a writer to construct a novel, and it has an important influence on the identity and thought of the characters in the novel. As Stuart Hall puts it, "The modern constitutes not identity out of difference but difference out of identity. The Modern never constitutes itself as an identity (different from others) but as a difference (always different from itself-across time and space" (93). Booker points out that "Forward-looking science and backward-looking utopia, then, are uneasy bedfellows (5)".

In the twentieth century our world is shaped by science. It is only reasonable then that our atavistic urges to escape must deal with science. But science and atavism are enemies. Science allows no retreating in time, and insists on contemplating the consequences of actions. In our time the utopian impulse has been largely replaced by dystopian projections of disastrous current trends. (Scholes and Rabkin 174)

When talking about the connection between dystopia and utopia, Scholes and Rabkin point out that time serves as a bridge between the two, linking dystopia, which predicts catastrophic trends, and utopia, which promotes a certain quality of the past. Therefore, a careful analysis of the space and time of dystopian novels is necessary to understand this kind of novels.

As Kaplan points out, the increasing number of futurist dystopian world in film and literature in the post-9/11 era evidences severe anxiety about the future (13). The notion that Native American literature revolves around the past is widely acknowledged. Although future-oriented fiction by Native American writers is not uncommon, other famous Native-American writers, such as Sherman Alexie, dabbled in science fiction. For a writer widely recognized in mainstream society as one

who calls for the restoration of local traditions, it seems perverse for Erdrich to join dystopia in her literary creation. But also, as Martinez-Farquina points out, Erdrich sends a message from a fictional future which, in accordance with the activist impulse that characterizes Native writing (see Blaeser et al. 2017), attempts to make us react in the face of climate change and the persisting attacks on women's rights all over the world. As an active ethnic novelist, Erdrich wants to make richer and better works available to her readers. Erdrich also said in an interview, "I don't feel like I'll ever get to the end of what it means to be an indigenous or Native person, and I have so many subjects and ideas that I really want to write about (50). She also tries to arouse readers' empathy and reflection on environmental, social and political issues through her dystopian novel.

3. DYSTOPIAN SPACE: ALIENATION AND "NON- PLACES"

Space is closely related to human activities and is endowed with different meanings by human beings. Human geographers think that "place" is not only a physical place, but also a carrier of meaning characterized by "man's idea". Humans associate their experiences and feelings with a particular region and space, giving it a special meaning, thus forming a place (Tuan 1977, Dainotto 2000, Harvey 2009). In *FH*, the alienation of daily space is mainly reflected in the alienation and heterogeneity of community space. With the development of cities, people are gradually alienated from each other. Modern technology not only brings convenient living conditions, but also creates the tension and oppression like that in Foucault's "Panopticon" theory (1977). In the novel, people are closely monitored, with their phones being located and tracked, and their home computers turning on automatically. People are suspicious of each other, their every move is monitored by the authorities, and pregnant women can be reported and arrested. The alienation of interpersonal relationship is the product of alienated space, which in turn leads to the lack of trust and betrayal in the society. The government's attempts to bring everyone under its control and surveillance are rooted in authoritarian societies and excessive power.

The cultural landscape of the novel also coordinates with the physical space to build a tense atmosphere. In the study of urban culture, Benjamin

Fraser proposes the concept of "material conditions" — the formation of urban landscapes that are represented in novels and films, and 'cultural imaginary' is the way that these spaces are culturally inflected within the works (20). He believes that in the cultural research method, material conditions affect cultural imagination, which in turn affects material conditions. One can examine the culture-relevance of this imaginary place and explore the cultural significance of these landscapes and how they become the present state. In *FH*, social unrest has raised economic concerns. There are long lines at the banks and people are only able to withdraw small amounts of cash. Cedar starts shopping in large quantities. She is prepared for the worst, and she will head into a barter economy. "It's not that there's no food right now, but there's panic about the long term" (132). The government imposes military control and took control of the broadcast television company. They block the news, "no newspapers, no television, radio extremely sketchy. Nobody knows exactly what is happening" (132). The unequal information makes people fall into a state of ignorance and helplessness. Even worse, it is a crime to help pregnant women, and the government offers rewards to those who report them. Cedar had to make several plans, "We make plan to stay, to hide, to run, to live normally. We decide to stay vigilant" (95). The above-mentioned landscapes are products of the author's imagination, and these spaces are culturally influenced in the novel. This series of cultural images of a turbulent society intensifies the dystopian space, and the reason lies in the excessive supervision and power of the regulatory authorities, which constitute the root cause of the dystopian oppression.

The second and third parts of the novel draw Cedar's escape route of "hospital- cave-reservation- hospital". These spaces have acquired the character of "non-places", becoming a place of transitoriness, anonymity and homogeneity. Cedar is forced into certain non-everyday spaces, and these spatial relationships further reveal how the external environment reflects her inner environment (or her mental state). In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé puts forward, "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (77). He classifies these spaces as "transit stations", places of anonymity and homogeneity.

In *FH*, hospital is such a “non-place”. Non-place users often have to provide some form of identification before entering the area, such as a passport at airport security or an identity card at a hotel, in order to enter the area. The government turns the hospital into a maternity prison, and they even release prisoners to accommodate pregnant women. “Pregnancy” becomes the identity card to enter the facility. The hospital is a quiet and comfortable paradise for pregnant women, in stark contrast to the fearful escape life outside. Cedar lives in Fairview Riverside Hospital room 624, which is well ordered and well lit. The food there is much better than ordinary hospital food, “I feel at home here (192) ...It seems impossible to feel anything but a calm and pleasurable acceptance of my comforting little hospital world” (197). But she soon discovers that in this isolated space, they are forced to take drugs every day and sleep like a log at night in order to prevent them from running away. She has never seen a woman walk out of the delivery room alive, and she knows that even if the baby is born, it won’t be returned to her. The nasty-nice nurses appear friendly so as to gain the pregnant women’s trust and then sell them out at a critical moment to get a reward. Before fleeing the hospital, Cedar and her roommate Tia strangled a nurse who tried to stop them from escaping. In such a social environment, good people have blood on their hands. This is no longer a normal society. It is a distorted society beset by dangers. The government originally rounded up pregnant women for research in order to find out what has caused human degradation. As more and more pregnant women are forced to leave before they can say goodbye to their families, they are deprived of their reproductive choice and freedom, even their lives, they become the victims of the tyranny of the government. At this moment, the fine line between radical reformism and social chaos has been finally broken, and the utopia that people tried to build finally turns out to be dystopia.

An important characteristic of non-place is anonymity. The hospital where Cedar is imprisoned a second time has a photo wall. Her roommate tells her not to look at the photos, saying “It’s bad luck” (392). Cedar goes under the wall.

There are women of every coloring and age, many younger than me, others older, some wear hats, head scarves, or a hijab, some wear a glittery barrette, even an old-school scrunchie. I step closer to read their names. Lily-Ann. Idris. Janella. Senchal. Megan. Vendra. Beneath each

name are two dates, Birth. Death. And below that a line that says: she served the future. (395)

The women on the wall all died in childbirth. They come from different places, with different skin colors and ages, but to others, they have only one name — “Bad Luck”. In this suffocating hospital, no one wants to lose their lives like the women on the wall. In a space where everything is uncertain, where pregnant women have no names and where the future is uncertain, fear looms over the hospital. The place that once treated patients has become synonymous with fear and death. The UPC sacrifices women’s freedom and rights in the name of human reproduction, which eventually leads to one tragedy after another. In such a non-place, all people have no identity, they only have a unified identity — “Bad Luck”, ironically they are shouldered to save the future.

According to the definition of “non-place”, the cave where Cedar and Tia hide while evading capture also has the same characteristics. Cedar escapes from the hospital with the help of her foster mother, hiding in an abandoned car and having to give birth in a cave when Tia shows signs of premature labor. “These were gangster hideouts, speakeasies, homeless people’s squats (276) ...It looks like a medieval dungeon wall” (279). The oppression of this dark, dangerous and bloody space suggests that Cedar may be capable of some pretty outrageous behavior. When Cedar finds that a group of mice has begun to bite the dead body of Tia’s baby, she put on her mother’s boots and crushed them against the floor. The cave provides shelter for them, but it is also a space of repression and fear, which makes people’s thoughts become distorted. Cedar finally loses herself, which leads to her crazy behavior.

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the rapid development of science and technology, people noticed the gap between hope, demand and satisfaction. Under the challenge from machines, men and women would have to produce and reproduce at the same efficiency. These inhuman consequences bring the variability of human nature and basic human relationships, such as family relationships, to the center stage. Therefore, in the dystopian novels, female writers have integrated their understanding and thinking of the family relationship and the role of women as mothers. The loss of maternal guidance is a common theme in dystopian literature. Cedar gives birth at the hospital and the boy is separated from his mother at

birth. Cedar may never see her baby again, a sign of the next generation's lack of identity. Cedar's experience invites readers to discuss women's rights and moral structures. As Martinez-farquina argues that the dystopian ownership of the pregnant woman's body on the part of the state in this novel is inspired by real and specific attacks on women's rights (165).

Cedar's experience proves that, far from creating an identity, non-place makes people lose their identity. An ordinary non-place passenger or customer finds her identity after passing through a transient area, and Cedar spends more than half her time in non-place, which leads to her lost identity. The environment reinforces her sense of isolation and helplessness. As Erdrich says, "*Future Home of the Living God* is more about things falling apart, about the chaos in the wake of disaster, and about how little we know when we need information the most. It is about how vulnerable women's rights are" (Atwood and Erdrich). The insecure and vulnerable perspective of the young mother-to-be elicits an emotional response, forcing readers to confront the fact that the world as we know it may not have a certain future or may be a non-place. Alienated cities and claustrophobic spaces pave the way for returning to the reservation. The way out of this dilemma for Cedar is to come out of the non-place and open the door to a future that is both permanent and certain.

4. NATIVE UTOPIA: HISTORY AND FUTURE

As mentioned above, space and time are two important concepts in dystopian novels. In order for a space to have an identity, it must have some characteristics or boundaries that distinguish it from other spaces. Space influences the construction of identity, and time is also an important reference. Michel de Certo affirms,

There is no spatiality belong not organized by the determination of frontiers (45). Boundaries are established through a narration rooted in history, For example. If there is a boundary dispute between two neighbors, they may take the case to court and chronicle the history of the land, Creating "genealogies of places" and legends about territories. On the contrary, where stories are disappearing (or else are being reduced to museographical objects). There is a loss of space. (46-47)

The future does not exist in isolation. It is connected with the past and the present. In *FH*, the retrieve of the reservation and return to traditional culture have become the guarantee for people to obtain future happiness.

The movement of Native American to take back their lost land and restore their rights against the backdrop of a turbulent situation. In this chaos, the Natives take advantage of the opportunity to recover lost land and decolonize, fighting for their revival and demonstrating their resilience and tenacity. Then, as Booker says, "dystopian critiques of existing systems would be pointless unless a better system appeared conceivable" (15). What is the ideal society that Erdrich proposes? The interpretation of time in *FH* shows her social ideal, which involves her reflection on the revival of Native Americans and the future of Native Americans.

As Martinez-Farquina puts it,

Whites peacefully returning their lands to the Natives—to the point where the "compassionate removal of non-tribal people" living on stolen land is not even necessary—is not a likely situation, even in a chaotic context like that described in the novel. Nevertheless, Erdrich's fictional reversal of power in order to confront settler colonialism makes a lot of sense as a Native utopia in the middle of dystopia. (171)

In her dystopian novel, Erdrich constructs her utopian imagination for the future of Native Americans. Take Eddy's efforts as an example, deregulation and decentralization are a longstanding goal for him to reconstruct identity through history and borders. When Cedar goes to the reservation to meet her biological family, she is surprised to find that her biological mother, Sweetie, and her family have a gas station and are affluent, middle-class. The current mess is not as traumatic for them as it is for non-Indians, as Eddy explains, "Indians have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we'll keep adapting" (43). The Native Americans have built a Native utopia, giving people confidence in their future. Eddy plays drum songs, sings warrior songs, and confuses the watcher; He also proposes a plan of action to ensure survival:

In public now, Eddy gives speeches and makes pronouncement like he's always been an extrovert. At home, he hums and sings. When he finishes singing, he sits at the kitchen table with stacks of papers, old

land deeds. He plots strategies. Thinks of survival measures, ways to draft our young people into working for a higher purpose. Where to get seeds. Pigs. Cows. Flocks of chickens. He wants to make the reservation one huge, intensively worked, highly productive farm...the white people really haven't bothered us because we seized the National Guard arsenal up at Camp Ripley...We're gonna be self-sufficient, like the old days. (352-353)

Under his leadership, local people grow medicinal varieties and trade it with white people, who use it as medicine for "soothing the freak-out brain" (352). They occupy the National Guard arsenal so that the white men won't disturb them. Erdrich turns the long-unresolved grief of Native American history into a force against adversity, giving the dystopian theme a new relevance. As the leader of the Ojibwe reservation revival movement, Eddy explains his view: "We're just taking back the land within the original boundaries of our original treaty" (333). Erdrich breaks through the stereotypes of Native Americans, creating images of Native Americans who can adapt to new environments with wits and bravery.

Erdrich warns people through nature's signals that Cedar and her parents see the gradual disappearance of winter. Here and there — the present and the past narrated in the novel — are as different as hell and heaven. Erdrich seems to be calling for action before the dystopia becomes a reality. Don't wait until disaster strikes to mourn a world that no longer exists. We can only hope that Erdrich's prediction never comes true and that neither we nor our descendants will see "the last snow on Earth" (416).

Coinciding with nature's ongoing anti-evolution is Cedar's quest for roots. Cedar is one of the few women who has been able to conceive successfully, and by asking about the future she is also looking back, and by sticking to tradition she is preserving the future. Cedar knows from an early age that she is descended from Native Americans. She used to be proud of her unique identity because her classmates would call her Indian Princess. As she grows older, however, she finds that she has nothing to do with Indians except this name. She doesn't understand their culture and speak their language. "Without my specialness, I melted" (6). The Indian identity makes her extraordinary, as she grows older, she finds that without culture, without language as a carrier, her identity is as a snowflake, which will eventually melt away. When she is

disappointed to discover that her Ojibwe name is the fairly common Mary Potts, she is just one in a long line of people with the same name. Her family is not the old aborigines, but the affluent middle class. Later, when she returns to the reservation, she gradually finds her identity. Cedar has called north of the reservation (including Canada) heaven several times because it is the only safe place for her to stay. There is no Internet, no GPS, no electronic monitoring. The people are trying to take back the land they have taken away. Only there could Cedar become a true Indian princess. She overturns her previous false and stereotyped expectations about race through watching and learning. Cedar put on a warrior T-shirt and begins humming the Ojibwe nursery rhyme with her stepfather and restores her Indian name, all in a sign of returning to tradition.

As Erdrich writes in the novel, "instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now" (98). Tommy Orange points out in his debut novel *There There*:

The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it's stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind, about the whole thing is this: If it isn't pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it is stuck in tradition, in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern? (2018, 77)

When we face the past and the future at the same time, what choice should we make? Andrew Ross holds that "utopianism is based on a critique of the 'deficiencies of the present', while dystopian thinking relies on a critique of perceived 'deficiencies in the future'" (143). Indeed, either dystopian or utopian fictions are set in places or times far distant from the author's own, but it is usually clear that the real referents of dystopian fictions are generally quite concrete and near-at-hand (Booker 19). When we face the uncertainty of the future, the past is no longer the center of people's troubles, and it is the right choice to strive to create conditions for the present. On the one hand, when the future of mankind becomes uncertain, Erdrich appeals to people to put the past behind them. On the other hand, she also hopes that people will attach importance to traditional culture. The reservation respects tradition and is grateful to the present, which has become the paradise of life extension, embodies Erdrich's imagination of the future, and also constructs her Native utopia in dystopian.

Through the above analysis of the “past” and “future”, we can know that time is an important metaphor, carrying Erdrich’s ideal of cultural revival and native utopia. The novel starts from dystopian and ends with utopian metaphor; it constructs utopian ideal and realizes the reversal in dystopia.

5. CONCLUSION

The cover of Cedar’s diary is decorated with a photograph taken at the beginning of the story when she first drives to the reservation to meet her biological mother. In one enormous, empty field a sign is planted that reads “Future Home of the Living God”. It’s just a bare field, fallow and weedy, stretching to the pale horizon (19). Cedar chooses this painting to decorate her notebooks, in which paper and fields become one in their emptiness, and in their work and growth. This possibility of creating something new gives the reader hope that Cedar’s children, as the living God, will eventually find a home in this land. Through the efforts of Eddy and other Native Americans to revive their culture and reclaim their land, Erdrich proposes the social ideal of Native American revival. This paper focuses on the alienation space and the depression and fear created by non-places in the novel, and reveals the harm and betrayal caused by excessive monitoring, excessive power and urban alienation, causing the crisis of trust and morality; meanwhile through the interpretation of time, it emphasizes the relationship between the past and the future; finally, it analyzes the Native utopia created by Erdrich in disorder and chaos. The novel emphasizes the importance of tradition and history, but also reminds people to cherish what they have now through the warning of nature. Such view also has profound implications for the present.

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