

BRAVE NEW AYA: A STUDY OF KRISTEN SIMMONS'S DYSTOPIAN FICTION *THE GLASS ARROW*

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Abstract:

Kristen Simmons, a twenty-first century American author has carved out her niche in the burgeoning genre of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (YADF). Her debut novel Article 5(2012), along with its sequels Breaking Point (2013) and Three (2014) earned her international acclaim. Simmons, in her stand-alone Dystopian YAFiction, The Glass Arrow (2015), unfolds the story of the teenager Aiyana (Aya). Snatched from the utopian forest of Isor, Aya is trapped in the 'walled' city of Glasscaster, where women are auctioned off by the city-men for their ability to produce male heirs. The Repressive State Apparatus of the Garden treats the women from wilderness as sex-objects to be used as reproductive machines and subjugates women as well as animals (Brax) and 'mute males' (Kiran). The paper investigates how Aya, even if hunted and imprisoned by the Magnates, attempts to resist the totalitarian system of the dystopian world and continues her search for a secured 'green world'. The paper seeks to interrogate whether Aya's idea of suicide as the only means of escape from this dystopian world suggests bleakness or optimism. The paper also discusses how Simmons resorts to the country-city binary to re-situate it in that of utopia and dystopia.

Keyword: *Young Adult Dystopian Fiction, Repressive State Apparatus, reproductive machines, totalitarian, dystopian world, country-city binary.*

'Non-conformity' is the watchword of adulthood and 'becoming' presupposes undoing the structures of domination. In the God-forsaken world of dystopian fiction, it is really amazing to have a female protagonist endowed with a vision and strength either to change the agencies of oppression or to offer an egalitarian society. The recent spate in the genre of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction with feminist outlook in the first two decades of the twenty-first century testify that even if the nations are becoming more and more gendered, truth is still valid in the post-truth world. The recent decades see an upsurge of the genre in works like *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, *The Carhullan Army* (2007) by Sarah Hall, *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-10) by Suzanne Collins, *Blood Red Road* (2011) by Moira Young, *Emergent* (2014) by Rachel Cohn, *City of Savages*(2015) by Lee Kelly, *The Power* (2017) by Naomi Alderman etc.

It's a matter of great rejoice that in the face of an all-pervading androcentric culture and backlash against feminism, female protagonists of YADF are showing new directions. If the dystopian fiction, in general came after the grotesque slaughter of World War I, YADF with feminist outlook, like its mother genre also evolves as a reaction against the upsurge of the New Right in the UK and the USA. Even if a New critic would reject any attempt at contextualization, Margaret Atwood states how America under Trump Rule has realized the fictional setting of her *The Handmaid's Tale* and how "worries about women's issues after the US election has made her book shoot back up best seller list" (Marsh). Desmet states, "Dystopias are almost inevitably characterized by a critique on the social and political realities of their day and age and it seems that more recent dystopian works have picked on the growing interest in the position of women in society from the 1960s and 1970s onwards" (Desmet 5). The subject position accorded to the female protagonist is no doubt the gift of feminist movements and feminisms. The female protagonists of

YADF are keen to make the environment more organic, inclusive, woman-friendly, progressive in real sense of the term and rich in sustainable development.

Kristen Simmons's *The Glass Arrow* is a unique creation. If Moylan defines utopian literature as “an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality” (Moylan 147), in *The Glass Arrow* we see a specific kind of genre blurring. It portrays both a dystopian world and offers a feminist utopia. Simmons does it by using certain binaries like the Wilderness/ City, Aya/ city girls in the Garden, Aya/ her cousin Salma. As a YADF, *The Glass Arrow* addresses issues like objectification of the female body, domestic violence, sisterhood, woman complicity in the oppression of women, female solidarity, family as an ideological state apparatus, role of ideologies, male gaze, ecofeminism etc. Again, Simmons like Atwood demonstrates that wilderness can be productively explored in genres other than nature writing. Before venturing out into the realm of critical analysis I would like to give a brief introduction to the story line.

The fiction starts with a chase. The protagonist Aya is chased by the Trackers, “the virulent caste, the bottom feeders of the city. They are thieves and murderers. Thugs” (Simmons 15). They trespass the pristine world of Isor to snatch away Aya and other wild women from the lap of nature to the nearby city of Glasscaster. Though Aya confesses that she knows the forest well as “the lines on her palms” and follows a zigzag pattern to avoid the Tracker hounds, she cannot escape their metal wires. Aya is trapped. Neither the Mother Nature nor the Mother Hawk comes to her rescue. The silence in the nature forebodes the imminent danger for the children of nature. Aya, a free bird in the forest is caught by the Trackers and she is red with her own blood: “A red bird in flight...”. A cardinal” (Simmons 18). She is trapped in the 'facility farm', where women are conditioned and auctioned off according to their ability to produce male heirs for the Magnates. It is the male member of the egalitarian world of the forest, Bian, who in his foolishness led the Trackers to the camp of free women. The fiction records Aya's resistance against the various oppressive agencies and her final victory.

The first gruesome feature of the dystopian Garden is its objectification of the female body and its attempt to erase the identity of women. Brought to the 'facility' called the Garden, Aya and other prisoners are re-named after flowers: Larkspur, Thistle, Lily, Daphne, etc. This very lyrical touch is nothing but a tacit ploy of erasing the identity of women. However, in her ignorance about nature, the Governess does not know that most of these plants are poisonous and hence fatal. These captive girls are kept under the constant surveillance of “the black camera box staring down from the high chain-like fence that surrounds the property” (Simmons 19). The hub of the capitalist regime classifies the women according to their reproductive capacity and suitability as sexual objects for male consumption. They are defined in terms of their relation to the means of production here reproductive capacity. Societal recognition comes only from their biologically rooted child bearing ability. A Purity test before the final handover is a must. This test is a veritable form of rape by the aid of male gaze. In the ceremonial purity test, Aya can feel being disrobed, see the spreading of her legs and can hear the Pip's snide jokes about her fertile body parts, but she can neither move nor scream. On the auction day when Aya is dressed in a skintight off shoulder ball gown, she feels like a skinmonger prostitute. Jasmine, a girl in the Garden is punished for breaking the Purity Rule before she is finally 'Promised' to her buyer. Actually, during the interview process in the private room, she 'had to' compromise her virginity. But now the Magnate denies her on the ground that she is not pure. Same was the case with Aya's mother. Aya was “spawn (ed) of some nameless, impatient buyer who took what he wanted before he signed her papers” (Simmons 44). But much like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, who was condemned to wear a scarlet letter 'A' for faults done by someone else, Jasmine and Aya's mother are forced to bear a large 'X' across their cheek. This very 'thingification' of living human bodies is horrifying. Even if Cixous and Irigary, in opposition to Firestone, praise and valorize women body as an especial source of women empowerment, since the women in the city do not have the right to their body, they just become objects. Their sexuality and biological function constitute their sole identity.

In the Garden the prisoner girls are stratified as First Rounders (the virgins), the Sloppy Second, the

Third Rounders and so on. The stratification is according to the expectations of patriarchy. The wealthiest merchants of the city are likely to buy the virgin First Rounders, use them as sex objects and as reproductive machines to produce male heirs. After serving the purpose of their buyers, they are to return to the Garden to be re-sold as a Second or Third Rounder for childbearing, or objects of pleasure to a less-moneyed man. Keepers are assigned with the duty to raise their girl children to be obedient and mild mannered for being auctioned off when they come of their age. Only one in a hundred girls gets selected to be a forever wife. The process of re-cycling goes on until the girls are 'bone-tired' and then they "end up scounging around the Black Lanes until they succumb to the plague" (Simmons 42).

Simmons shows how in this dystopia, family, the fundamental unit of the patriarchal society perpetrates violence against women and emerges as the most effective tool to perpetuate the subordination of women. In the sheer absence of close family ties it has become the crucial site of women's repression and works as an ideological state apparatus (ISA). Aya laments for her friend Daphne, who in spite of being the daughter of a computer programming merchant has prepared herself for the auction. Aya relates how "...the moment the female census gets too high, they'll be collected, along with their girl children, to be sold in the city. Sometimes their families even offer them up early for credits" (Simmons 23). A socialist feminist critic however would not be surprised to learn the oppression within the family structure. Domestic violence dates back to the establishment of family system. However, because of its insidious nature it remains largely invisible in public domain. In contrast to this nuclear family system is put the communal living pattern of Isor. Critics like Firestone have championed it in lieu of nuclear family system. Captive Aya ruminates over her forest life:

...I'm bringing home fish from the stream and Salma's there waiting to cook it, while Tam and Nina chase each other around the fire. Bian and Metea are there too, but the vision fades... (Simmons 20)

This communal life is actually an extended version of an *oikos*, which includes the members of the extended family, the dependants and even the pets. In the solitary, Aya develops friendship with a wolf named Brax. Even if wolves are generally believed to be predatory animals, Aya befriends him.

The women in this dystopian Garden are thoroughly coursed in the capitalistic patriarchal ideology. In course of their socialization they have internalized the false belief systems of patriarchy. Aya, being a country girl remains an outsider among the fashionable city girls, who justify their roles as baby-makers and take pride over the fact that they get bids. They are jealous of the fact that Aya's selling price is more than their as she is naturally more fertile, "she does not have to have the treatments to activate her baby-maker" and "twice as likely to produce a living, healthy boy child than any other woman born in the city." Aya laments: "These girls don't know freedom" (Simmons 23). Being coursed in the patriarchal ideologies these girls consider themselves as "two legged wombs... sacred vessels... ambulatory chalices" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 146). Playing upon the Machievellian suggestion that power can be achieved through a combination of coercion and consent, patriarchy keeps up its domination. It practices the coercive method of 'divide and rule' and creates subjects who voluntarily subscribe to the reigning ideologies. Through the Governess, the ruling class maintains its hegemonic position that serves their fundamental mercenary interest. The movie about "the girl who poisoned herself when she couldn't please her master anymore" (Simmons 122) acts as an ideological state apparatus to 'educate' the resident girls of the Garden that they should consider these practices as the 'natural' order of things. The Governess socializes the prisoners with the instructive narratives:

She talks about how our grandmothers' grandmothers tore down the barriers between men and women with their trickery, and destroyed cities with their petulance. How they began to poison their wombs so that they could not bear children, and murdered men with their wicked powers... These were not women. They were witches. And so we thank the Magistrate for their abolishment and give ourselves openly to the service of their sons, so

that we never again lose our path (Simmons 40).

Patriarchy 'manufactures' women's 'consent' to their own subordination through mass ventilation of patriarchal ideologies, naturalization of the violence, denouncing the liberated woman, branding the errant women and celebrating the sacrificing women. Going against the grain, Aya does not conform to this ruling ideologies preached in the Garden. Aya is no fool to be bullied, for, she is not ignorant of the truth, which her deceased mother used to tell her:

In her version, women walked free and proud. No one owned them. No one hunted them. Their bodies and minds were their own. That was until two Magistrates fell in love with the same woman... A council was called to rectify the issue, and when they learned that she had willingly given herself to both, had her killed. The rules changed then. ... the men were scared by their own weakness... Women in power-merchants and healers were accused of using black magic to gain their status. Girls became the property of their fathers and husbands. And the Magistrate became monsters, making slaves of innocent girls and slaughtering those who stood against them. (Simmons 41)

The instructive story of the mother is an eye-opener for Aya. Whereas, in the city, women themselves help in the subjection of other women, in the country-side of Isor, women are the protectors of women. The wilderness offers the much craved sisterhood, which the man-made Garden denies. Whereas, in the city women are sold by their own fathers and husbands, Aya in her captivity thinks only about the safety of her family-members Salma, Tam and Nina.

However, Simmons is not prejudiced in her portrayal of the male characters. Even in the dystopian city, Aya comes in contact with a mute male, whom she names 'Kiran'. For the first time in the city, Aya meets in Kiran a male, who is not hungry for her female flesh. Kiran, a Driver is the silent listener of Aya's life-story during her last one month stay in the solitary. Aya tells Kiran all about her mother-from her early struggles to make an egalitarian world in Isor to her sudden death due to overdose of a sleeping potion made from bloodroot. Kiran becomes a cathartic means for Aya to pass her unbearable days in the Garden: "The days grow shorter, not just because winter is coming, but because Kiran begins visiting every night" (Simmons 96). With the aid of gestures, Kiran shares his plan about Aya's escape from the city, but all hopes shatter with his failures to work out the plans in reality. Even if Aya loves Kiran, she takes him to his beloved Kyna, because her love is not possessive, because she does not want to own her lover as a property rather values his emotions and respects his commitment.

Aya, the female protagonist of the fiction steals the show. She becomes an embodiment of self reliance, leadership principle, a true comrade and obviously a decision maker. Throughout the fiction, she remains an independent woman. When Kiran's project fails, she rejects his solace:

I don't want his comfort. I don't want his help. I remember why I don't have friends. Friends give you hope when you shouldn't have it. They make you trust in things other than yourself. They trick you into forgetting what really matters. (Simmons 103)

Aya manages till one hundred and seven days to avoid the meat market. To save her body from being auctioned off in the meat market, Aya hurts her body. Though, the Governess of the Garden is successful in cramming down Aya's throat, scrubbing her skin and giving her a civilized look in pointy, knee-high boots and skintight dress, she has no rein over Aya's mind. Even if the Governess can dominate her body, her spirit remains free. The subscribers to the 'Cartesian dualism' would say that Aya 'reflects' and therefore she 'is'. In her last attempt to avoid getting sold in the auction, Aya borrows a wolf's fur from a little boy and starts behaving like a dog to present herself as undesirable as possible. But to her dismay, this little boy turns out to be the nephew of the Mayor of Glasscaster and the Mayor buys Aya as a plaything for the boy Amir, who may use Aya as a sexual object after five years. All her hopes of returning to the green world ends in smoke. In the purity test as she is certified as 'untouched', she is sent to her buyer's place. And it is from her buyer, Mr. Greer's house that Aya finally succeeds in escaping with the help of Kiran. Aya risks her

own freedom for the life of her half-friend Daphne, whom she rescues and takes away to the free land of Isor. As Aya, Daphne and Kiran enters the mountain area, Aya vows, “I will never look back again”, (Simmons 314) but she is dismayed to learn that in her absence her family has moved to that very dreadful city. Like a true leader and comrade she decides to come back to it for Tam, Nina and Salma. Back in the city, Aya confronts a horrifying scene a father pimp, who leads two girls in clean linen dresses towards the meat market. Aya wants them all to realize that there is a land outside this city, where women own themselves and are not treated as livestock to be sold in the market. As Salma sharply refuses to retreat, in broken heart, Aya leaves with Tam and Nina for her utopian forest of Isor. But the Trackers are still chasing them and this time Mr. Greer is also with them and they want Aya (read her body) alive. Aya decides to kill herself to save her family. At the final moment of her life we see a perfect communion between Aya and Kiran. They kiss and feel, “Part of my soul may belong to Kiran, but part of his belongs to me, too” (Simmons 316). She wants to eternize the 'good minute'. Whereas, sexuality in Glasscaster, acts as, to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's phrase, “a signifier of power relations”, in Isor it is reciprocal and instinctive. She persuades Kiran to shoot her lest the trackers could not subjugate her. She tries to convince Kiran, “They don't want to bring me back just to hang me, they want to bring me back to own me. They'll leave my body out there to rot, just like the others” (Simmons 321). She asks Kiran to shoot her with an arrow in her shoulders and advises him to come back to wake her up after the Trackers leave. Though she herself does not think that the bloodroot can prove magical in bringing her back to life, she convinces Kiran that it will work. She is happy that she will either “be free or dead”-at least she will be the owner of her body. Bearing the arrow in her shoulders, Aya experiences a trance-like situation and feels the warm touches of her deceased mother. She is transported to a world where “there is no blood, no fever, no grief. Here there is only peace... Everything is okay now. Everyone is safe. I am free” (Simmons 327). Looking at the protruding arrow on her shoulders, she is certain that her “sacrifice will allow [her] family to live” (Simmons 328). An optimistic ending is needed for the target readers, who being young will mostly have faith on poetic justice. Wild Aya is contrasted with wild Salma also. The city of Glasscaster emerges, as a city of “a thousand mirages” (as is the case in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*), for Salma, who from her very childhood sought to escape the hardships of life in the mountains. Whereas, coming back to the city is tantamount to a “nightmare of arrival” for Aya, it proves to be a “euphoric arrival” for Salma. Salma sharply refuses to retreat. Her words, “We are just women”, reveals that she is in the process of conforming to these demeaning practices of patriarchy.

The idea of suicide is dealt in the novel as a possible escape from an unavoidable doom. The suicide of Straw Hair, a girl in the Garden who soaked herself in the poisonous stream to hasten up death by getting herself charred by the electric fence, leaves a permanent mark upon Aya's mind. After her own several failed attempts to escape from the city, she is convinced by the suicide of Straw Hair that “She has escaped. Truly escaped” (Simmons 88). During her attempt to escape, when she realizes that there is no way left but to confront the Trackers, she decides not to yield to their desires. She plans with Kiran to commit suicide. She says: “By the end of today I'll either be free or dead.” Simmons, perhaps does not want to make her protagonist Aya a weakling succumbing to an escapist attitude. Her Aya remains 'brave', an incarnation of 'will power'.

Simmons resorts to the country-city binary to re-situate it in that of utopia and dystopia. The novelist puts the wilderness, nature uncontaminated by civilization in contrast to the city and champions the wilderness. Whereas, the wilderness gives the promise of an authentic relationship between humanity and earth, the capitalistic city is the locus of chaos and disorder and to borrow Rashmi Varma's phrase a “zone of occult instability”. Biodiversity in the wilderness is a proof that creation is not meant for human use only. The biotic community of the wilderness is put in contrast to the exploitative Magnates. The city of Glasscaster, the embodiment of “spiritual drought”, is a quintessentially modernist space contaminated by materialistic concerns. The city is the place of subjugation and exploitation. The Magnates with their

capitalistic colonizing force invade the wilderness and displace women. Wilderness as the highest expression of the earth's fertility and productivity is symbolized in various forms in various cultures ('Vana Durga' in Bengal, Dravidian goddess 'Kali', 'Rupeswari' in Assam). Feminist critics often bring to notice how the male writers like Burke, Wordsworth, Shelley, Thoreau equate the wilderness with masculine sublimity. Simmons provides a useful counterpoint to the male writers by making it a place of habitation. Ecofeminist critic Vera Norwood argues that women write wilderness differently, experiencing immersion rather than confrontation. Simmons challenges the western myth that wilderness is no place for a woman and re-writes the gendered dichotomy of masculine wilderness and feminine domesticity. Simmons shows how in this God forsaken dystopian city, people have nullified the existence of God to deny that "there's something more powerful than them..." (Simmons 38). Whereas, Aya believes in the existence of Mother Hawk, a female deity who gave the first people their "reincarnated souls", her 'half friend' Daphne thinks: "There's no such thing as a soul. Just bones and blood and body" (Simmons 39). Whereas, the wilderness celebrates the communal bonhomie, the city not only subjugates women, but animals and mute males also. Throughout the text, Aya remains in search of a secured 'green world' and ultimately achieves her goal. Aya, like nature, in Hopkinsian term "is never spent". She remains nature anthropomorphized.

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