

A Contemporary Feminist Dystopia: Mexico Under Siege in Jeanine Cummins's "American Dirt" (2020).

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Abstract:

Jeanine Cummins's novel "American Dirt" portrays a contemporary feminist dystopia in Mexico under siege. The book follows the story of a mother and her son fleeing cartel violence in Acapulco and making their way north to the United States. The novel's portrayal of Mexico as a violent, lawless country where women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation has been criticized by some as perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This research examines the ways in which "American Dirt" presents a dystopian vision of Mexico through a feminist lens. Drawing on feminist theory and dystopian literature, the paper argues that the novel's portrayal of Mexico as a dangerous and oppressive place for women reflects broader systemic issues of misogyny and violence against women in Mexican society. Furthermore, this research explores the ways in which "American Dirt" challenges traditional notions of the dystopian genre, which often focus on imagined futures rather than present-day realities. The paper argues that the novel's portrayal of Mexico as a contemporary feminist dystopia offers a powerful critique of the current political and social climate in the country. The paper also analyzes the controversy surrounding the novel's publication, particularly the criticism of Cummins's decision to write about Mexican characters and culture as a non-Mexican author. The research explores the ways in which this controversy reflects larger debates about cultural appropriation and the representation of marginalized groups in literature.

Ultimately, this research argues that "American Dirt" offers a compelling critique of the systemic violence and oppression faced by women in Mexico, while also highlighting the complexities and challenges of representing the experiences of marginalized groups in literature.

Keywords: American Dirt, feminist dystopia, Jeanine Cummins, The Cartel, Mexico

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1. Introduction

In 2018, publishers engaged in a competitive bidding process for the rights to Jeanine Cummins's novel "American Dirt", with Flatiron Books ultimately securing the deal and paying a significant advance to the author. The book's release was accompanied by an extensive promotional campaign, including the distribution of copies to libraries near the Mexican border and endorsements from prominent authors such as Stephen King and Sandra Cisneros. Oprah Winfrey also selected the novel for her book club in January 2020, which contributed to its debut at the top of the New York Times bestsellers list in February of that year. However, despite its commercial success and initial positive reviews, the book has faced widespread criticism for its portrayal of Mexico and Mexicans as inaccurate and stereotypical.

Dystopian literature has gained popularity in recent years, particularly those that tackle feminist issues. Within this subgenre, feminist dystopias explore how women are marginalized and oppressed in society. By employing a feminist dystopian lens, this study examines how "American Dirt" reflects and comments on gendered power dynamics in society. It argues that Cummins effectively portrays a feminist dystopia that reflects contemporary society, which distinguishes it from other dystopian works that depict fantastical future civilizations.

1.2. Feminist Dystopia

Feminist dystopia theory is a subgenre of dystopian fiction that specifically explores the ways in which women are oppressed and marginalized in society. Angela Carter, a novelist, and critic, is credited with coining the phrase "feminist dystopia" in her 1980 article "Notes from the Front Line.". Carter used the word in her article to refer to a new generation of dystopian literature produced by women in the 1970s that investigated the connection between gender and power in authoritarian countries (Carter 1980). Carter's article centered on works like Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Marge Piercy's "Woman on the Edge of Time," both of which have become iconic works in the feminist dystopia genre.

Furthermore, in "Back to the Future: Feminism, Gender, and the Utopian Imagination," Baccolini defines feminist dystopia as a subgenre of feminist science fiction that "imagines a future in which the institutions and practices of patriarchal societies are radically challenged and/or overthrown, resulting in a social order that is more just and egalitarian" (1997). Baccolini notes that feminist dystopian fiction often portrays societies that are highly oppressive and regimented, where gender roles are strictly enforced and women are marginalized. The protagonists of these stories are often women who resist and subvert patriarchal structures in their daily lives, and who may ultimately succeed in

overthrowing them. Baccolini argues that feminist dystopian fiction is an important tool for feminist critique and activism, as it highlights the ways in which patriarchal power structures are perpetuated and reinforces the importance of imagining alternative futures based on feminist principles.

When relating to the theory of feminist dystopia, there is the issue of fictionality regarding the time and place of the events taking place within the narrative. It is often related that dystopia represents a fictional and futuristic society within the corpses to warn present readers of the consequences of a world that is controlled by a patriarchal government or society, and women are subjugated to the will of men. These dystopias serve as warnings about the dangers of patriarchy and the importance of feminist activism. According to Sarah L. Brouillette, feminist dystopias are "future-oriented fictions that imagine the consequences of contemporary social relations and institutions, particularly those of gender and sexuality, if they continue on their current trajectories" (Brouillette 2006). Nevertheless, dystopian fiction can also be set in the present or the past. Some scholars argue that dystopian fiction set in the present or the past can be even more effective in highlighting the dangers of oppressive social and political structures. By setting a dystopian narrative in the present or the past, the author can draw attention to the ways in which oppressive structures are already present in society.

It is possible for feminist dystopias to be based on real-world societies or to be set in the near future. In either case, the purpose of a feminist dystopia is to expose the ways in which existing power structures oppress women and other marginalized groups and to imagine alternative futures that challenge these structures. Dr. Sangeeta Ray, in his article "Feminist Dystopias: Imagining Women's Future in Science Fiction" claims:

"Feminist dystopias are often set in the future or in alternate versions of the present, but they are always grounded in the realities of the world we live in. They take the injustices and inequalities of our society to their logical extreme, and they imagine a world in which those injustices and inequalities have become even more entrenched and oppressive. By doing so, feminist dystopias expose the ways in which existing power structures oppress women and other marginalized groups, and they challenge us to imagine alternative futures that are more just and equitable." (Ray 2010).

Here Ray highlights the characteristics and purpose of feminist dystopias. He explains that feminist dystopias are often set in the future or in alternate versions of the present, but they are always grounded in the realities of the world we live in. This means that even though they may sometimes be fictional, they are based on the social, political, and economic structures that exist in our world. Furthermore, he illustrates that feminist dystopias take the injustices and inequalities of our society to their logical extreme, imagining a world in which those injustices and inequalities have become even more

entrenched and oppressive. By doing so, feminist dystopias expose the ways in which existing power structures oppress women and other marginalized groups. They provide a critique of these structures and challenge readers to imagine alternative futures that are more just and equitable. Whether fictional or not, feminist dystopias highlight the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in discussions of power and oppression.

Here it is worth noting that the genre of dystopian fiction is not limited to the future or elements of science fiction. A dystopia is simply a society marked by certain dysfunctional conditions, and it can be set on any scale, from a dysfunctional family to a city or a nation. Examples of dystopian novels set in modern settings include "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," (1962) by American author Ken Kesey which is set in a mental institution with draconian controls, and "Lord of the Flies," (1954) which depicts a dysfunctional society on a deserted island. Dystopian fiction set in the present day often exaggerates negative aspects of society to warn readers about where we may be headed. For example, Orwell's "1984" (1949) depicts a surveillance state, while "Leila" (2017) by Prayag Akbar portrays a near-future dominated by an ideology taking hold in the present day. The dystopian genre is not limited to the future or science fiction and can be set in any type of society, including present-day settings.

Feminist dystopian literature depicts severe situations to demonstrate how patriarchal power systems oppress women and other marginalized groups. Here Elizabeth Russell asserts:

"Feminist dystopias are often characterized by extreme conditions and situations, which serve to highlight the ways in which patriarchal power structures oppress women and other marginalized groups. By taking these injustices and inequalities to their logical extreme, feminist dystopias expose the systemic nature of gender-based oppression, and they challenge readers to imagine alternative futures that are more just and equitable." (Russell 1999).

By taking the injustices and inequalities of our society to their logical extreme, feminist dystopias expose the ways in which existing power structures perpetuate gender-based oppression, and they challenge readers to imagine alternative futures that are more just and equitable.

Through their vivid depictions of oppressive and often violent societies, feminist dystopian fictions invite readers to consider the ways in which gender-based oppression operates in our own world. They highlight the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in discussions of power and oppression, and they encourage readers to imagine alternative futures that challenge existing power structures and promote greater equity and justice. By presenting extreme conditions, feminist dystopian fiction brings attention to the urgent need for social change and inspires readers to take action toward building a more just and equitable society.

Moreover, Resistance is found to be a fundamental element of feminist dystopias, serving as a powerful tool for social critique and feminist activism. As was previously attained, in feminist dystopian literature, women and other marginalized groups often find themselves living in societies that are oppressive and violent. However, rather than passively accepting their subjugation, the protagonists of these stories engage in various forms of resistance to challenge and subvert the oppressive structures that control their lives.

Resistance can take many forms in feminist dystopias. It may involve acts of individual rebellion, such as refusing to conform to gender roles or engaging in covert forms of resistance against the state. It may also involve collective action, such as women banding together to form underground networks or joining larger revolutionary movements. It is through the depiction of resistance that feminist dystopian literature highlights the importance of agency and empowerment in the struggle against oppression. It emphasizes the ways in which women and other marginalized groups are not passive victims, but rather active agents in the fight for a more just and equitable society.

Published in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the following examples all illustrate the ways in which feminist dystopias often depict collective action as a means of resisting oppressive power structures. In Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel "The Handmaid's Tale," Offred joins an underground feminist resistance movement called Mayday in an effort to overthrow the theocratic regime that has taken over the United States. Similarly, in Naomi Alderman's 2016 novel "The Power," women around the world gain the ability to physically overpower men and form a global feminist movement to upend traditional power structures. Even more, in Sheri S. Tepper's 1988 novel "The Gate to Women's Country," a group of women forms a matriarchal society dedicated to preserving knowledge and maintaining peace, while in Octavia Butler's 1993 novel "Parable of the Sower," the protagonist Lauren Olamina creates a utopian community called Earthseed that prioritizes sustainability, self-sufficiency, and empathy.

2. Jeanine Cummins' American Dirt, A Background

American Dirt was published in 2020 and quickly became a bestseller. The American author Jeanine Cummins, of Irish and Puerto Rican heritage, published her third and #1 New York Times best-seller novel American Dirt which sold over two million copies. The novel tells the story of Lydia Quixano Perez, a Mexican bookseller who flees to the United States with her son after her family is brutally murdered by a drug cartel. The novel gained global recognition with positive reviews from many critics shortly after its release. It also became the 83rd book chosen by Oprah Winfrey for Oprah's Book Club as she admitted "Jeanine Cummins accomplished a remarkable feat, literally

putting us in the shoes of migrants and making us feel their anguish and desperation to live in freedom." (Oprah's Book Club: The complete list," n.d.). Moreover, the Mexican- American novelist, Sandra Cisneros who received the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, announced it as "the international story of our time" (Cummins, as cited in "American Dirt (Oprah's Book Club) | Jeanine Cummins | Macmillan," n.d.). The Washington Post credited the novel reviewing that it "offers both a vital chronicle of contemporary Latin American migrant experience and a profoundly moving reading experience." (Rosenwaike 2020)

Nevertheless, besides this positive recognition, the novel received multiple negative reviews concerning Cummins herself on the grounds of her ethnic background. The novel has received criticism for its portrayal of Mexican culture, particularly from Latinx writers who argue that Cummins, a non-Mexican author, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and appropriates Mexican culture for profit. Many critics found it rather inadequate for an author who is prominently described as "White" to relate and tackle such a delicate topic as the immense tragedies faced by the Mexican people and, in specific, the Mexican migrants. A number of Latin authors and critics based their attack on the fact that before the release of the novel, Cummins in a 2015 essay in the New York Times, stated "I am white. The grandmother I shared with Julie and Robin was Puerto Rican, and their father is half Lebanese. But in every practical way, my family is mostly white." (Buzzfeed 2020). However, in a 2020 interview with Shelf Awareness after the book's release she declared: "I was resistant, initially, to writing from the point of view of a Mexican migrant because, no matter how much research I did, regardless of the fact that I'm Latinx, I didn't feel qualified to write in that voice. Because these are not my life experiences." (Huffpost 2020). Latinx writers accused her of what they describe as 'rebranding' herself as Latinx after the release of the novel in order to evade such accusations that have nonetheless surfaced. For them, it would have been more liable if the author of such a narrative was Mexican belonging to the same ethnic group who actually obtained a higher level of familiarity and awareness of such a sensitive issue. Furthermore, Hispanic authors accused publishers of declining such narratives written by Mexicans and at the same time published and praised the corpses presented by Cummins which to them was an act of discrimination. They also claimed that Cummins exaggerated in her overall description of the Mexican people and in specifically the migrant experience deeming it as inaccurate.

Many Latinx writers have spoken out against the novel, arguing that the novel ignores the experiences of actual Mexican writers. For example, in an editorial for the New York Times, Myriam Gurba writes, "Cummins's book is a work of fiction, but it traffics in the same racist tropes and

stereotypes that Mexican-Americans like me have been fighting for decades.” (Gurba, 2020). Gurba argues that the novel maintains the idea that Mexican people are violent and dangerous and that it ignores the fact that Mexican writers have been writing about the cartel and its effects on Mexican society for years.

The criticism of *American Dirt* highlights the ways in which white authors can appropriate the stories and experiences of marginalized groups for profit, without fully understanding or respecting those experiences. In response to such allegations, Cummins canceled her 2020 book tour, "Based on specific threats to booksellers and the author, we believe there exists real peril to their safety," (Feuer, 2020) as stated by Flatiron Books' President Bob Miller.

Nevertheless, far from the controversy around the author and the issue of cultural appropriation regarding the author's ethnicity, *American Dirt* is with no doubt a thrilling experience reflecting the immense tragedies and sufferings of the Mexican migrants. No one can deny the exerted effort from Cummins to establish such a compelling narrative that takes the reader into the depth and reality of the migrant experience. Cummins reflecting on the attempted research enabling her to write *American Dirt* admits:

“I started my research by reading everything I could find. A couple of years worth of reading and just watching all the documentaries and doing as much sort of academic research as I could I went to Mexico. I spent time in the borderlands, both north and south of the border. I interviewed everyone I could think of interviewing I spoke to a lot of people who were making their journey north” (Jeanine Cummins: "American Dirt", 2020)

The outcome of her research is apparent in the excessive details found within the novel as the reader follows the fictional journey of two compulsory migrants evading the evils of a locally established brutal force that unfortunately exists in reality.

American Dirt is a gripping novel that takes the reader on a journey through the dangerous world of migrants traveling through Mexico to reach the United States. The opening of *American Dirt* sets the stage for the rest of the novel by introducing the reader to the protagonist, Lydia Quixano Pérez, and her life in Acapulco, Mexico. The novel begins with Lydia and her eight-year-old son, Luca, attending a quinceañera celebration for a family friend. The joyous occasion is quickly shattered when a group of cartel gunmen arrives and open fire on the partygoers, killing Lydia's husband and several others.

The opening scene is tense and chaotic, with the sound of gunfire and the sight of blood and death. The reader is immediately thrust into the violent world of the Mexican drug cartels and the

danger that Lydia and her family face. The scene also establishes Lydia's character as a strong and determined woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to protect her son. The cartel pursues Lydia because they see her as a threat to their operations and a potential liability. Lydia's husband was a journalist who had written an exposé on the cartel, and his murder was a direct result of his reporting. The cartel believes that Lydia may have information or evidence that could implicate them in her husband's death, and they are determined to silence her and anyone else who might pose a risk to their organization.

In addition, Lydia and her son Luca witness a violent attack by the cartel at the beginning of the novel, which puts them in danger and makes them potential targets. The cartel boss, Javier Crespo Fuentes, is particularly vengeful and sees Lydia and Luca as a way to exact revenge on those who have crossed him. Throughout the novel, Lydia and Luca are pursued by the cartel, who use violence and intimidation to try and catch them. This creates a sense of tension and danger that permeates the entire novel, as Lydia and Luca must constantly be on the lookout for danger and rely on their wits and the help of strangers to survive.

As they flee the scene and make their way back to their home, the reader is given a glimpse into their life before the violence. Lydia is a bookstore owner who loves books and reading, and Luca is a sensitive and intelligent boy who is obsessed with Greek mythology. After Lydia's husband is murdered by a local cartel boss, she and her son Luca must flee their home to avoid the same fate. Their journey north is fraught with danger, and they are forced to rely on the help of strangers to survive.

Their journey begins on La Bestia, the infamous train used by Central American migrants to reach the US border. Along the way, they encounter various characters, some who help and others who try to harm them. The migrants they meet on their journey become a makeshift family, helping each other through the trials and tribulations of the journey.

Traveling through Mexico, Lydia and her son face numerous challenges, including violent attacks by the cartel and corrupt officials. Nevertheless, Lydia and her son Luca are captured by corrupt Mexican officials while trying to cross the border into the United States. After Lydia and Luca have been traveling for weeks and are close to the US border, they are stopped by Mexican immigration officials. The officials demand bribes from the migrants, but when they refuse to pay, the officials take them into custody. The conditions in the detention center are grim, with overcrowded cells, no access to food or water, and unsanitary conditions. They are separated from the other migrants and held in a cell with other women and children. Both are subjected to verbal abuse and threats by the

guards, who are portrayed as sadistic and cruel. Lydia is determined to escape and reunite with her son, and she manages to bribe one of the guards with her wedding ring. She is able to escape with Luca and a few other migrants, but they are quickly pursued by the guards. The chase is tense and suspenseful, with Lydia and Luca narrowly avoiding capture.

The events of the capture and detention highlight the corruption and brutality of the Mexican immigration system and the dangers faced by migrants trying to cross the border. It also underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of Lydia and other migrants who are willing to do whatever it takes to survive and protect their loved ones. They also encounter moments of kindness and compassion, such as when they are taken in by a group of nuns who provide them with food and shelter.

The novel builds to an enthralling climax as Lydia and Luca make a final push to reach the US border. They are pursued by the vengeful cartel boss, Javier Crespo Fuentes, who is determined to exact his revenge. The tension is palpable as Lydia and Luca face their final obstacles and make a desperate bid for safety. They are forced to find a new way to cross the border and continue their journey north. They ultimately decide to attempt to cross the border through the Arizona desert.

Along with two other migrants, they manage to hire a guide to help them cross the border. The guide takes them across the desert at night, using landmarks and his knowledge of the terrain to guide them toward the US border. The journey is difficult and dangerous, with extreme temperatures, treacherous terrain, and the constant threat of being caught by border patrol agents.

Despite the obstacles, Lydia and Luca make it across the border and into the United States. However, their journey is far from done, as they must continue to face the obstacles of being illegal immigrants in a new nation. The crossing of the border is a big accomplishment for Lydia and Luca, but it also serves as a reminder of the perils and suffering that migrants encounter on similar travels.

American Dirt is a powerful and emotional novel that explores the hardships and dangers faced by migrants traveling through Mexico. It is a story of survival, resilience, and the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. In relation, this paper will investigate the literary theory of feminist dystopia within the novel, portraying the Mexican social condition under the violent oppression of the Mexican cartel and the condition of women within such circumstances. An initial understanding of the literary theory of feminist dystopia is required as to highlight the major viewpoints that will be exposed throughout the performed analysis.

3. Mexico, A Potential Dystopia:

As previously stated, American Dirt introduces an existing functioning dystopia set in Mexico, which is mostly controlled by the drug cartel. As a result, it is deemed appropriate to depict the

contemporary reality of Mexico's social situations. The drug cartel in Mexico is infamous for its brutal crimes, which include extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, and murder. The cartel's primary source of income is the drug trade, which involves smuggling illegal drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl into the United States. The cartel uses violence and intimidation to maintain control over its territory, often engaging in battles with rival cartels and law enforcement officials.

Mentioning the Cartel and its crimes, one must refer to the most active cartel within the Mexican region, namely; The Sinaloa Cartel. The Sinaloa Cartel, also known as the Guzmán-Loera Organization, the Pacific Cartel, the Federation, and the Blood Alliance, is a prominent international drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime syndicate that was founded in Mexico during the late 1980s ("Sinaloa Cartel | History, Activities, Leaders, and Facts" n.d.). It operates within several regions of the world, primarily in the Mexican states of Sinaloa, Baja California, Durango, Sonora, and Chihuahua. The cartel is headquartered in the city of Culiacán, Sinaloa, and is currently led by Ismael Zambada García. The United States Intelligence Community deems the Sinaloa Cartel to be the most potent drug trafficking organization in the Western Hemisphere, making it arguably more influential and capable than the notorious Medellín Cartel of Colombia during its peak.

The Sinaloa Cartel engages in drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime. It is considered one of the most robust criminal organizations globally, and undoubtedly the most powerful in Mexico since at least the late 2000s and early 2010s ("Mexico captures suspected drug lord 'El Chapo'," 2011). Its operations have caused considerable violence and instability in the regions where it operates. The cartel is infamous for using extreme violence and intimidation tactics to maintain control over territories and intimidate rivals. It engages in brutal acts such as torture, beheadings, and mass killings.

The Sinaloa Cartel has also been accused of corruption, having bribed government officials, police personnel, and other authorities in order to safeguard its activities and avoid punishment ("Ex-Mexican Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna Convicted," n.d.). This has allowed the cartel to operate with minimal fear of legal repercussions for its illicit acts. Furthermore, the cartel engages in money laundering by employing front firms and shell organizations to disguise its unlawful gains. It has collected large quantities of money through drug trafficking and other illegal activities, which it has utilized to extend its operations and power.

One of the most notorious crimes committed by the cartel was the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa in 2014. The students were protesting in Iguala, Guerrero when they were attacked by

the police and handed over to the cartel. The students were never found, and the case remains unsolved to this day ("Mexico missing students: What happened to the 43? " n.d.) This incident sparked outrage and protests across Mexico, highlighting the government's failure to address the power and violence of the cartel.

3.1. Corruption and Weakness of the Government and Law Enforcement in Mexico

Mexico has long struggled with weak governance, corruption, and a lack of rule of law, which has enabled powerful criminal organizations such as drug cartels to operate with relative impunity. In other words, the Mexican government's inability to effectively combat the cartels has allowed them to gain significant power and influence, thus putting the Mexican society in what may be referred to as under siege.

Corruption has been identified as one of the primary factors contributing to the weakness of the Mexican government. Drug cartels have been known to bribe government officials, police officers, and other authorities to protect their operations and avoid prosecution. As a result, the rule of law has been undermined, making it harder for the government to adequately tackle the cartels. Furthermore, the government's limited resources and capacity to address the issue of drug trafficking have hindered its efforts to combat the cartels. Mexico has struggled with high levels of poverty and inequality, forcing the government to prioritize other sectors such as education and healthcare. Consequently, law enforcement agencies have been underfunded and understaffed.

In addition, the cartels' use of extreme violence and intimidation tactics to maintain control over territories has made it difficult for the government to challenge their power. Many officials fear for their safety and that of their families. This has led to a lack of trust in the justice system and a perception of lawlessness among citizens. Cartels have been able to control entire regions of the country. Consequently, the most vulnerable members of society are left to fend for themselves.

3.2 Mexican Journalism under the Reign of the Cartel

Mexico has been considered one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 136 journalists have been killed in Mexico since 1992, and many of these murders remain unsolved (Reporters Without Borders 2021). The Mexican government has been criticized for failing to protect journalists and for not adequately investigating crimes against them. Drug cartels in Mexico have frequently targeted journalists who report on their activities. Journalists who report on corruption, drug trafficking, and other sensitive issues face threats, intimidation, and violence. In many cases, journalists have been killed or

disappeared. The risks faced by journalists in Mexico have led to self-censorship and a culture of fear among the media

While it is not accurate to fundamentally label Mexico as a dystopian society, it is worth acknowledging that some of the conditions in the country have the potential to lead to a dystopian future if left unaddressed. Mexico faces a number of social and political challenges that can contribute to a sense of hopelessness and despair among certain segments of the population. The high prevalence of violent crime, which is mostly driven by drug cartels and other criminal organizations, is one of the most serious challenges. This has instilled dread and insecurity in many Mexicans, contributing to a collapse in faith in government institutions. Unless effective measures to curb crime and violence are implemented, Mexico risks becoming a nation where anarchy and disorder dominate.

As a result, despite recent gains in poverty reduction, Mexico remains a country with considerable levels of poverty and inequality. Many individuals continue to lack access to basic essentials such as healthcare, education, and clean water, which can add to feelings of pessimism and despair among those striving to make ends meet. This, along with political insecurity and a lack of policy consistency, makes it difficult for the country to achieve progress on critical issues and can add to the populist disappointment. That is, unless Mexico is able to adequately handle these difficulties, the country risks becoming a dystopian society in which the few prosper at the expense of the many. Aware of this present status, Jeanine Cummins', even if with some exaggeration, introduces her narrative as a warning and to voice those who are suffering in silence.

3.3 Females and Discrimination in Mexico

Women in Mexico face a range of challenges, including gender inequality and violence. Mexico has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world, with women being frequent targets of abduction, rape, and murder (Beltrán & Freeman 2012). The issue is further compounded by a culture of impunity, as many cases go unsolved. Economic inequality is also a significant issue, with women in Mexico earning less than men on average. Women are also more likely to work in low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

In addition to these challenges, women in Mexico face limited access to reproductive health services, including contraception and abortion. This is due to a combination of legal restrictions, cultural stigmatization, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure (Beltrán & Freeman, 2012). Political underrepresentation is also a concern, as women are still underrepresented in political offices in Mexico, which limits their ability to influence policy decisions that affect their lives. Finally,

discrimination against women is prevalent in many areas of life, including the workforce and education.

As the current social and economic conditions in Mexico have been discussed in the previous section, the following of this study will focus on the feminist dystopian theory that is presented in Jeanine Cummins' novel "American Dirt" (2018). This will involve an analysis of the novel's portrayal of Mexican women and culture in the context of patriarchal systems and structures. Better grasp can be gained of how the depiction of women in literature can perpetuate harmful presumptions and support oppressive power relations through studying the feminist dystopian themes in the novel.

4. Feminist Dystopia Theory in American Dirt

Exposing the feminist dystopia theory in the novel *American Dirt* necessitates an initiative analytic study of the work's theme of dystopia. In other words, it is necessary to evaluate Mexico's sociological components as displayed within the events of the novel in order to declare it as a functional dystopia.

The opening sequence of Jeanine Cummins' "American Dirt" takes place in Acapulco, where Lydia Quixano Pérez, the protagonist, and her family possess a bookstore. While attending a quinceañera festivity, a group of heavily armed men invade the courtyard and commence shooting indiscriminately at the guests. The scene is characterized by pandemonium and horror, with individuals screaming and running for their lives. The violence is surprising and appalling, with bullets soaring through the air and striking innocent bystanders. Sebastián, Lydia's spouse, makes an effort to protect their young son, Luca, but he is shot and dies before their eyes. Lydia and Luca manage to escape the carnage by hiding in the bathroom, but they are the sole survivors of their family.

The picture emphasizes the realities of living in Mexico, where violence and brutality are a daily reality for many people. The fact that the slaughter occurs at a quinceañera celebration, a customary coming-of-age ritual for young ladies, elaborates on the senselessness of the violence and its impact on innocent people. Here, Sebastián being a journalist is a victim of the dangers that journalists face when reporting on organized crime and drug cartels. The violent attack on Sebastián and his family at the beginning of the novel is a stark reminder of the risks that journalists face in Mexico when they investigate and report on sensitive issues.

Sebastian, as an honest journalist, aimed to reveal the crimes and corruption of the drug cartel to the public. However, the cartel members perceived this as a significant threat to their power and illegal activities. As a result, they targeted Sebastian and his family, slaughtering them brutally in an attempt to silence him and deter other journalists from investigating their activities. This heinous act

demonstrates the extent to which the cartel members are willing to go to maintain their grip on power and avoid being held accountable for their crimes.

The same scene additionally exploits the fact that many police officers in Mexico receive regular payments from local cartels and describes the police officers who are present at the crime scene are described as:

“seven receive regular money from the local cartel. The illicit payment is three times more than what they earn from the government. In fact, one has already texted el jefe to report Lydia’s and Luca’s survival. The others do nothing, because that’s precisely what the cartel pays them to do, to populate uniforms and perform the appearance of governance. Some of the personnel feel morally conflicted about this; others do not. None of them have a choice anyway, so their feelings are largely immaterial. The unsolved-crime rate in Mexico is well north of 90 percent.” (Cummins 19)

As previously mentioned, In Mexico, the police force receives more compensation than what is allotted by the government, creating a moral dilemma for officers. Despite being tasked with upholding the rule of law, many officers are pressured to accept bribes from cartels, which perpetuates the widespread corruption within law enforcement. The prevalence of corruption among police officers in Mexico is a significant contributor to the country's high rate of unresolved crimes. Although officers may be coerced or threatened into accepting payments from cartels, the moral and ethical implications of their actions are significant. The depiction of police officers in Mexico in the novel "American Dirt" is representative of a pervasive issue in the country.

Moreover, attempting to escape Acapulco, Lydia begins to pray that there will not be any roadblocks because:

The roadblocks around Guerrero, as in much of the country, had become a menace. They are manned by gangs or narcotraficantes or police (who may also be narcotraficantes) or soldiers (who may also be narcotraficantes) or, in recent years, by autodefensas – armed militias formed by the inhabitants of certain towns to protect their communities from cartels. And these autodefensas may also, of course, be narcotraficantes. (Cummins 35)

roadblocks around Guerrero, including those in Acapulco, are not only a sign of the violence and lawlessness in the area but also a tool used by different groups to control the population. These groups include drug cartels, corrupt police and soldiers, and self-defense groups known as autodefensas, who have formed armed militias to protect their communities from the cartels. However, the novel also points out that these autodefensas may also be involved in criminal activities, including drug

trafficking. This underscores the complexity of the situation in Guerrero and the difficulty of distinguishing between different armed groups.

For the people living in Acapulco, the presence of these roadblocks, manned by these various groups, creates a sense of being under siege. They feel trapped within the city, with limited options for leaving or seeking help. The roadblocks make it difficult for goods and supplies to enter the city, leading to shortages and rising prices. The constant presence of these armed groups and the threat of violence create a climate of fear and uncertainty among the local population.

Here, Cummins depicts Mexico as a vast prison, where its citizens are confined within its walls, and the cartel, the police, and even the army operate as prison guards. This portrayal is reminiscent of the central theme of dystopian fiction, where individuals are oppressed and subjugated by a powerful and pervasive system. Cummins' description of Mexico as a prison reflects the societal conditions that exist within the country, where individuals are often constrained by the corruption and violence that permeates the social fabric. The dystopian elements in "American Dirt" provide a powerful commentary on the realities of life in contemporary Mexico, where the oppressive forces of cartel violence and government corruption create a sense of confinement and subjugation.

4. 1 The Cartel and Women in American Dirt

In *American Dirt*, author Jeanine Cummins portrays the harsh realities of violence towards women, particularly in Mexico, where the novel takes place. Throughout the course of the novel, Lydia and other female characters face various incidents of violence. These incidents serve to highlight the dangers and hardships faced by female migrants, who are often subjected to exploitation, abuse, and oppression.

Lydia's husband is murdered by the cartel, which is the catalyst for her journey north with her son. As Lydia reflects, "She had always believed that the things that happened in the newspapers happened to other people" (Cummins 11). However, after her husband's murder, Lydia realizes that no one is safe from the cartel's violence. She is also fully aware of the penalties awaiting those who chose not to remain silent as emphasized in the novel "Lydia has seen outspoken widows before, widows made brave by their anguish. She's watched them talk into the cameras, refusing to be silenced, placing blame where it belongs, scorning the violence of cowardly men. Naming names. Those women get gunned down at funerals" (Cummins 2020). The quotation offers an accurate representation of the hardship and dangers endured by Mexican women who refuse to be silenced in the face of violence and injustice. Lydia, the main character of "American Dirt," exceeds vocal widows who are bold in their

grief and eager to speak out against the atrocities of the criminal cartels that have taken over their neighborhoods.

However, it also vividly reflects the tremendous dangers of speaking up in such circumstances. Women who refuse to be quiet and are prepared to disclose names are frequently targeted for revenge, and are even killed at funerals. This highlights the grave dangers that people who dare to question the current quo and speak out against the cartel's rule face.

As Lydia was attempting to escape from Mexico and protect herself and her child, she is sexually assaulted by a corrupt police officer while driving. Though she manages to fight him off and escape, Lydia reflects on her experience, stating that she is "fortunate... [to be] still alive" (Cummins 96). Here, Cummins exemplifies the ever-present danger faced by women in Mexico, especially when traveling alone. The fact that Lydia is targeted by a police officer, a figure of authority meant to protect citizens, highlights the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in Mexican society.

During their journey toward salvation, Beto, a fellow migrant, warns Lydia and her son Luca about the risks of their journey. Beto's words carry weight when he tells Lydia, "You gotta be careful, señora. You're traveling alone with a child. It's not safe" (Cummins 2020). This serves as a stark reminder of the significant risks faced by women and children traveling alone in Mexico, reflecting their vulnerability to exploitation and violence. The use of the honorific "señora" further emphasizes the gendered dimension of these risks, emphasizing the fact that women are particularly targeted in such situations. Beto's warning also underscores the urgent need for caution and preparation when undertaking such a journey. This is indeed a powerful commentary on the challenges faced by female migrants and the need for greater awareness and support for these individuals.

Other female characters in the novel also face violence. The depiction of Rebeca's experience in *American Dirt* is a disturbing portrayal of the pervasive and brutal violence faced by women traveling through Mexico. Rebeca's kidnapping and rape by members of the cartel signifies what could be referred to as the norm of what may happen on every day basis to girls, whose only crime is their attempt to escape the state of imprisonment within their own nation. Her trauma is further emphasized by her words, "They took me... They did things to me. They hurt me so much" (Cummins 2020), which underscores the unspeakable nature of the violence that she has endured. Rebeca's experience serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability of women traveling alone in Mexico and the lack of protection afforded to them.

Soledad, a teenage girl traveling alone, is similarly kidnapped and forced to work as a drug mule. Lydia later comments on Soledad's plight, saying, "She's just a child... She's been taken and

trafficked like a commodity" (Cummins 2020). This claim draws attention to the terrible circumstances of teenage girls in Mexico and the ubiquitous issue of human trafficking. It emphasizes how susceptible to exploitation and abuse these young women are, as well as the importance it is to deal with the underlying causes of this growing problem. Lydia and her companion Soledad are also attacked and beaten while resting in a shelter by a gang of males. Lydia reflects on the incident, stating, "They came in the night and took what they wanted" (Cummins 2020). This quote illustrates the susceptibility of women in shelters and the lack of protection afforded to them.

As the previous sections have already covered, there are many various forms of violence against women in Mexico. Women are still at risk of being assaulted and exploited, even at shelters, which are designed to be safe havens for women fleeing domestic abuse and other forms of maltreatment. The cycle of violence and trauma is frequently perpetuated by men torturing, raping, and sexually assaulting women at shelters. This functions as an explicit signal of the urgent importance for tackling the underlying causes of sexism and assault against women in Mexico in addition to offering refuges where these issues can be resolved.

In addition, the cartel shoots and kills Marisol, a migrant who is traveling with Lydia and Luca, after they detect her in an effort to flee. She was so young, and she did not deserve to die, Lydia says in her reflections on Marisol's passing (Cummins 2020). The scene exposes the catastrophic outcomes of trying to escape Mexico's persecution and bloodshed.

Lydia during a conversation with a migrant rights activist, Eduard, whom she meets on her journey to the United States asks "How do they go home and look their wives and daughters in the eye after what they've done to other women?" (Cummins 2020). Lydia asks the question about how men who commit such crimes can go home and face their families. This question reflects the horror and disgust that Lydia feels at the thought of men who commit such heinous acts and the impact that this violence has on families and communities.

Lydia's question also highlights the broader societal issue of violence against women in Mexico and the need for greater awareness and action to address this issue. The conversation with Eduard serves as a turning point for Lydia, as she becomes more committed to joining the fight for migrant rights and raising awareness about the dangers faced by those who are forced to migrate due to violence and corruption in their home countries. Cummins underscores the universal truth that violence against women is not only a crime against the individual victim but also a violation of the basic human rights of all women.

These incidents of violence towards women illustrate the challenges faced by female migrants. As Cummins writes, "Women have to be careful, always" (98). The novel portrays the resilience and strength of these women in the face of such violence, highlighting their ability to survive and persevere despite the odds stacked against them. As Lydia reflects, "She is a survivor... She has fought and clawed and scraped her way back to life" (Cummins 2020).

4.2 Feminist Resistance in American Dirt

In order to continue the discussion of "American Dirt," it is crucial to emphasise the novel's subject of female resistance. Despite the prevalent violence and injustice that occurs in Mexico, the female characters in the novel display extraordinary endurance and courage in the face of hardship. The women in "American Dirt" embody the spirit of resistance against the male-dominated frameworks and systems that seek to control and oppress them, whether through their bravery in attempting to flee the country or their ability to form strong and supportive relationships with one another. This topic of female resistance is a striking statement on women's fortitude in the face of abuse and suffering, and it emphasises the significance of supporting women's empowerment and agency in the fight for gender equality.

The protagonists in American Dirt confront an abundance of distress and sorrow as a result of the cartel's atrocities. Lydia Quixano Perez, the heroine, witnesses the gruesome murder of her husband and mother-in-law in a cartel slaughter. Lydia and her son Luca are forced to abandon their house, becoming targets of the cartel's violence as they try to reach the United States. This, with no doubt, is the peak of female resistance and will to survive within a male dominating society which displaces females within a horrific prison formed to abuse and torture its inhabitants. Lydia and Luca's journey is perilous, as they must negotiate inhospitable terrain while evading the cartel's operatives who are hunting them.

Lydia, discovering she and her kid have no other option, chooses to travel the train used by migrants to cross the border from Mexico into the United States. In describing the train, it is stated within the narrative:

“The train has earned the name La Bestia because that journey is a mission of terror in every way imaginable. Violence and kidnapping are endemic along the tracks, and apart from the criminal dangers, migrants are also maimed or killed every day when they fall from the tops of the trains. Only the poorest and most destitute of people attempt to travel this way. Lydia shudders at the YouTube

stories, the photographs, the grim warnings delivered by recent amputees." (Cummins 2020).

The statement conveys an unambiguous and distressing image of the terrible perils encountered by migrants striving to evade the cartel's massive jail in Mexico. The train voyage, dubbed La Bestia (the beast), is described as a terror operation, with violence, abduction, and maiming rampant along the lines. The migrants who try this trek are reported to be among the poorest and most impoverished, emphasizing the dire conditions that lead them to take such risks.

The use of YouTube videos, images, and cautions from recent amputees underscores the broad awareness of the perils of this trip. The conditions endured by these migrants are clearly distressing and life-threatening, with the possibility of falling from the top of the train. Lydia's choice to board the train is a courageous display of resistance and survival. Despite the hazards, Lydia decides to travel the train since she feels it is the only way to reach safety and safeguard her son. The fact that she chose to take matters into her own hands and seek to escape the cartel's grip could potentially be interpreted as a form of resistance to their repressive system.

Furthermore, Lydia's journey on the train is a testament to her strength and resilience in the face of extreme adversity. She endures unimaginable hardship and danger, but her determination to survive and protect her child drives her forward.

As previously stated, Soledad is raped and mistreated on the voyage north. Despite her young age and lack of experience, Soledad exhibits a remarkable capacity to adapt and live in the harsh situations they encounter along the trip, and she builds a great relationship with Lydia and her young son. Another character who demonstrates remarkable strength and resilience is the nun Sister Rosa, who runs the shelter where Lydia and her son seek refuge. Despite the constant threats and intimidation from cartel members, she remains steadfast in her commitment to helping women in need, and even risks her own life to protect them.

These stories underline the important role of female solidarity and resistance in the face of hardship and violence, as well as women's tenacity in the battle for gender equality.

Conclusion

Jeanine Cummins offers a feminist dystopia in *American Dirt* that stresses the injustice and marginalization of women in Mexican culture. The novel's depiction of the cartel and the role of women within it serves as a warning about the perils of sexist power systems and emphasizes the importance of feminist struggle. While the work has received criticism for its depiction of Mexican culture, it also provides a captivating critique on gendered power relations in society.

Nevertheless, it is critical to evaluate how the novel promotes damaging stereotypes and appropriates Mexican culture for commercial advantage. It is our job as researchers and readers to deal with these topics critically and meaningfully.

As Cummins writes, "This is the moment, this is precisely the moment when we have to wake up" (Cummins 195). Through its portrayal of feminist resistance against patriarchal power structures, *American Dirt* compels us to awaken and take action against the injustices of society.

المستخلص

ديستوبيا نسوية معاصرة: المكسيك تحت الحصار في رواية جينين كومينز "أميركان ديرت"

محمد صلاح محمد ربيع

أثارت رواية جينين كومينز "أميركان ديرت" (2020) جدلاً ونقاشاً حول تمثيل المهاجرين والتجربة المكسيكية الأمريكية. زعم بعض المراجعين أن الكتاب يشجع الصور النمطية الضارة والاستيلاء الثقافي، بينما أشاد به آخرون لتركيزه الانتباه على تحديات المهاجرين.

يمكن اعتبار "أميركان ديرت" (2020) مساهمة في نوع الأدب الذي يركز بشكل خاص على تجارب النساء في إطار نظرية ديستوبيا النسوية. يخصص هذا النوع كثيراً كيف تتحكم الحضارات الإقطاعية وتضطهد أجساد النساء وحياتهن. تُجبر ليديا، بطلة رواية "أميركان ديرت" (2020)، على مغادرة المكسيك مع ابنها بعد مقتل زوجها على يد منظمة إجرامية مخدرات. خلال السرد، واجهت مجموعة متنوعة من المشاكل والمخاطر، بما في ذلك الاعتداء الجنسي والاعتداء الذكوري. الغرض من هذه الورقة هو تحليل الرواية من منظور ديستوبي نسوي واستكشاف كيفية تصويرها لتجارب النساء في المجتمع الأبوي. تبحث الدراسة أيضاً في كيفية مساهمة الرواية في النوع النسوي المرير الذي يقدم حلولاً ذات مغزى للاضطهاد الذي تواجهه النساء. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تستكشف الدراسة الجدال الدائر حول الرواية وتصويرها للتجارب المكسيكية الأمريكية وكيف تتقاطع مع قضايا المساواة بين الجنسين والعدالة الاجتماعية.

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