



Dystopian Fiction as the Harbinger of Future Armageddon: A Critical Study

Ms. Sonali Bapurao Govind

Ph.D. Research Scholar, H.P.T. Arts & R.Y.K. Science College, Nashik(Affiliated to the Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.) Email-ID: sonalibgovindnbt@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper investigates the oracular nature of Dystopian fiction in speculating potential social issues and technological advancements. The research method employed for the study is a close-reading and thematic analysis of the significant works like 'Fahrenheit 451' by Ray Bradbury (1953), 'This Perfect Day' by Ira Levin (1970), 'Feed' by M.T. Anderson(2002), and many other recent developments to the literary genre. The study utilizes historical comparative analysis of dystopian premonitions and resultant real-world advancements as well as it examines sociologically how Dystopian narratives replicate and create awareness in people pertaining to impending menaces. The World Wars, industrial and technological evolution and flourishing contributed to the Dystopian elements in the society badly affecting all aspects of human life including environmental balance and it started being reflected in the literary writings. Literature mirrors human life and society of the respective era and Dystopian fiction has been delineating earnest concerns and hazards of humanity with respect to near future times. So, dystopian literature is not for sheer entertainment, but it has speculated the real-life developments much before their externalization. The significance of the research study is that it reflects that Dystopian fiction acts as a pivotal accoutrement which proposes discernment into possible future debacles, catastrophe and many other such negative



aspects of human life and society through the instrumentality of imaginary, creative, and speculative narratives which portray contemporary social, political, religious, psychological, economic, environmental, moral, ethical, genetic, and technological burning issues and concerns.

Introduction:

The word ‘Dystopia’ was, for the first time, used by John Stuart Mill who was an English philosopher, economist, politician, and civil servant, in 1868 in his political speech on the state of Ireland in which he severely criticized the government’s policy on Irish Property, stating “what is commonly called utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they (the government) appear to favour is too bad to be practicable”. The history of dystopia can be traced back to the reaction to the French Revolution of 1789 and its resultant dictatorship. Dystopian fiction emerged as a response to the Utopian. Its early history can be traced in Gregory Claeys’ ‘Dystopia: A Natural History (Oxford University Press, 2017). The dystopian fiction started with E.M. Forster’s ‘The Machine Stops’ (1909). M. Booker says that “ ‘The Machine Stops’, ‘We’, and ‘Brave New World’ are great defining texts of the genre of dystopian fiction, both in the vividness of their engagement with real-world social and political issues and in the scope of their critique of the societies on which they focus”. The early examples of dystopian fiction are Jack London’s ‘The Iron Heel’ (1908), Yevgeny Zamayatin’s ‘We’(1924), Aldous Huxley’s ‘Brave New World’ (1932), George Orwell’s ‘1984’ (1949), and so on.

Dystopia means an imagined bad place in the near future characterized by corruption, destruction, totalitarian control, surveillance, oppression, dehumanization, loss of privacy, and many other such negative things which are fatal to the well-being of humans and their society. Dystopia is exactly opposite to Utopia which depicts so idealistic and perfect place which can never exist in reality. The term Utopia was introduced by Sir Thomas More in his book of the same title published in 1516. In the course of time, many novels depicting Utopian as well as Dystopian elements came in the vogue. However, this study focuses on how dystopian literature serves as the foretelling or premonition for the potential disasters and destruction, social and moral degeneration in the upcoming years by analyzing few significant dystopian novels.

Critical Analysis:

1. Fahrenheit 451 :



Published in 1953, the novel was written by the American writer Ray Bradbury. It was written during Second Red Scare aka MaCarthyism era. It was the period of intense anti-communist fear and persecution in America which was named after Senator Joseph MaCarthy. It was characterized by political repression and persecution of left-wing individuals and a campaign spreading fear of communist, suppression of thoughts etc. We find out many parallels to this historical context in the novel. The novel is set in a futuristic American society where literature of all kinds is banned and firemen are assigned with burning books in place of extinguishing fires. The title signifies the temperature at which a paper catches fire and starts burning. The protagonist of the novel is Guy Montag, a fireman, who starts burning books initially, but in the course of time, he starts questioning his society's suppression of knowledge. So, the burning of books resonates with MaCarthy's process of thought control by suppressing the views of people.

At one moment, Guy Montag says, "We have everything we need to be happy but we aren't happy. Something missing. I looked around. The only thing I positively knew was gone - the books I had burned in ten or twelve years. So, I thought books might help." (Montag, Page no 39) Montag now understand that happiness cannot come from material things and artificial entertainment only.

Gradually, Montag starts realizing emptiness within and understanding the power of books which the author wants his readers to understand through the character of Montag. He quotes, "There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing." (Page no. 48) When Montag sees that a woman choose to burn with her books. It serves as a crucial awakening moment for him and he understands that books must have something profoundly valuable if someone wants to die in order to .

Another important character in the novel is Mildred Montag, who is Guy's wife, a deeply absorbed person in television, and that's why, thoroughly disconnected from reality and society. She is interested in artificial entertainment and does not have any connection with genuine feelings. She is scared of books and knowledge. She says, "Books aren't people. You read and I look around, but there isn't anybody....My 'family' is people. They tell me things; I laugh, they laugh." (Page no. 69) She is not able to connect with real human beings, but she prefers manufactured characters in TV as her family.

This novel foretells many things which we encounter in the contemporary times. People fall prey to depression very easily after being disconnected from the world. And yet, they do not admit their depression. Mildred suffers from depression but does not admit that she is unhappy even if she attempts



suicide. Psychologically, people have become blunt. We also find that Mildred betrays Guy by reporting about his book collection. She considers knowledge as a dangerous game rather than a quest for meaning.

In this way, the novel indicates future debacles as it was published in 1953. Today, we find it relevant as we can experience these things in our life and around which have been explored in the novel as major themes. It talks about censorship and intellectual suppression as books are burnt. This shows that free thinking and knowledge is prohibited. “A pen is mightier than the sword”, so, books are counted as perilous as they can trigger rebellious attitude among people. We always find that government very smartly eliminates such challenges and complex ideas. Moreover, we see that advanced technology makes people isolate from their families and society. They immerse in big wall-sized television screens, they enjoy spending time on social media handle and lack necessary human interactions which we can see happening everywhere , in all age-groups of people. Consequently, we have increased rate of break-ups in relationships, divorces, no mutual understanding at all ! The novel also sheds light on the theme of knowledge vs. Ignorance. It speaks of significance of knowledge, curiosity, critical thinking, and learning . These are essential for human dignity where blind conformity to everything is shown as fatal. Today, we see that people do not question anything because they are ignorant of things happening around. They are absorbed in artificial entertainment programmes on TV, laptop, computer, mobiles, and so forth, they look alienated from the society and reality. They don't live in the real life, but they live reel life...fake life!

2. Feed:

The next significant novel ‘Feed’, published in 2002 by M.T. Anderson is a remarkably Dystopian novel that speculates the disasters of ubiquitous social media, targeted advertising and neural interfaces. This novel was published before the advent of current smart-phones and contemporary social media, and it portrays a shocking, terrible picture of upcoming times where constant digital connectivity has drastically changed human psyche and society. This novel is set in future America. It revolves round the teenager named, Titus and his relation with a girl named Violet. She rebels against the feed-dominated culture. When their feeds are temporarily disabled by a hacker, they experience a rare moment of disconnection from the continuous flow of information and advertisements implanted in their brains. Titus is an average upper middle class American teenage boy and the story is narrated in first person by him.

The novel investigates potential consequences of technological developments on human beings and society. It also shows the considerable decline in critical thinking, communication skills, and true human attachment. It also poses questions about the place of technology in our life and if technology ultimately



serves to enhance or diminish our humanity and morality. Today, we witness that even if there is any calamity or disaster or accident, people are excited to record the scene or capture the picture instead of rushing to the rescue of the victim.

The novel is fraught with advertising and constantly bombarding users with targeted messages, devised to compel them to consume more and more. The novel criticizes consumerism and its influence on people and society, emphasizing how it can result into a loss of individuality, environmental imbalance and social degradation. The novel depicts how environment is neglected and damaged badly owing to over-consumption. The characters are mostly indifferent to these things and concerned about the superficial pleasures and distractions caused by technological feeds. The novel warns about the debacles related to environment and endeavours to make readers aware of the protection of ecosystem. At present, we are facing burning issues raised by climate change and resultant loss of season cycle and emergence of new viral and bacterial diseases. This novel also shows the apathetic approach of characters towards Nature and environment.

Furthermore, the novel throws light on the loss of identity and individuality as characters are so much addicted to the technology and are unable to define anything outside the parameters set by the feed and its advertisements. The novel talks about the challenges of maintaining one's own identity in the world where technology and consumer culture have become prevalent and dominant. It also expresses the dehumanization of characters in the digitized world.

“We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.” (Page no. 7) The murder and deterioration of language and communication skills have become very rife these days. Due to social media, we experience that people use slang words, abbreviated forms of language which is a very superficial communication lacking any warmth, respect, compassion, and genuine human dialogue. This novel sheds light on this negative aspect as well through the characters and their shallow words. This is very thought-provoking novel that explores impending menaces of unstoppable and uncontrolled technological advancements, consumer culture and environmental degradation. It functions as a cautionary tale admonishing readers to take a critical stand against technology and its adverse impact on human beings and society. So, the novel relates to the contemporary scenario where people are seen tied to technological gadgets all the while, so closely connected to every update in the sphere of technology, and depicting the fear of missing out (FOMO) in the world of information technology.

The main characters in the novel make us relate to their actions and behaviour. Titus, the protagonist, in the beginning of the story, accepts everything regarding feed without question, he defines himself and



everything around him through consumption and shows hollowness in emotional dimension. But after meeting a girl, Violet, who is intelligent and anti-consumerism individual, Titus develops capacity for deeper emotions, questions uncomfortable truths and experiences genuine connection with Violet. Through the transformation of Titus's character, the novelist is trying to make his readers understand the negative impact of feeds and advertisements on individuals and save themselves from getting stuck in the quicksand of this technological delusions.

3. This Perfect Day:

A technocratic dystopian novel by American writer Ira Levin was published in 1970 and explores the themes of individual freedom, technological control, and human resistance to superficially perfect yet tyrannical societal system. The novel is set in the highly controlled world where a supercomputer called 'UniComp' regulates every dimension of human life. People living under the Unification are regularly drugged every month so as they will remain satisfied and cooperative family members. They are directed to follow a certain routine of life such as what and when to eat, where to stay, whom to marry, when to reproduce etc. Everyone has a counsellor to guide. Everyone wears a permanent bracelet which acts as a scanner and through it, UniComp gets access to them and tells them where to go and what to do. At the age of 62, everyone is euthanized by Uni with the overdose of medicines. People are made to believe that at the age of 61 or 63, elderly person died of natural causes. The long-lived men and women are the invisible but real world government living in their hidings.

Chip (Li RM35M4419) is the major figure in the novel having distinct light hair, and heterochromia i. e. different coloured eyes, initially programmed and compliant, getting continuous medications and abiding by UniComp's rules, gradually rebels against the computer-controlled society and sets him free from conditioning. After meeting Wei, his mentor, he becomes aware of the artificiality of his world and awakens to the reality and experiences genuine emotions and desires for Wei for the first time. This novel indicates Chip's protest against assigned identities and acceptance of individuality. Wei is another significant character in the novel who helps Chip to see through the true colours of the controlled world and programmed beings.

This novel sheds light on different themes. Firstly, social control mechanisms through continuous medication regulating people's emotions, and behaviour; suppression of individual thoughts and desires; artificial harmony in the society. Secondly, it explores technological surveillance where the supercomputer UniComp governs all aspects of human life and there is no any personal privacy. This novel has anticipatory elements which parallel with contemporary issues.



4. Brave New World:

The novel written by English author Aldous Huxley and published in 1932, is a dystopian novel which is set in futuristic World State where human reproduction and society are controlled through advanced technology. The world State maintains equilibrium through genetic engineering, psychological manipulation and hard social hierarchy. The society depicted in the novel is characterized by creation of test tube babies and their conditioning as per their pre-determined social class; children's undergoing sleep-learning to grasp social values; pharmaceutical control of citizens through 'Soma' to keep them free from any unpleasant feelings; elimination of the concept of family and promotion of casual relations.

Hypnopædia, a term coined by Huxley in the novel signifies the method of constantly playing recorded messages to teach individuals while they sleep. In the story, the World State employs hypnopædia to inculcate and shape its people from the very childhood, shaping their attitudes, choices, and behaviors to fit into the prescribed social frames. These messages recite catchphrases that promote consumer culture, social control and satisfaction with one's allotted caste and role in society. For example, some of the recorded messages children hear are: "A gramme is better than a damn."(54), "Ending is better than mending."(49), "Everyone belongs to everyone else."(43)

This novel basically hints at the contemporary issue of designer babies which is unethical and dangerous technological advancement through which you can design the baby biologically which is against the Nature and has its potential menaces.

Conclusion:

In this way, the study shows that dystopian literature is not for sheer entertainment, but it speculates as well as mirrors burning concerns of the contemporary world and also warns readers and audience to critically think over it and endeavour to find out solutions to the same so as to make the world a better place that is liveable and sustainable.

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