

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

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Abstract

The present research paper investigates the oracular nature of Dystopian fiction in speculating on `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 in the literary genre. The study utilises a historical comparative analysis of dystopian premonitions and the resultant real-world advancements, and examines sociologically how Dystopian narratives replicate and foster awareness of impending threats. The World Wars, industrial and technological evolution, and flourishing contributed to dystopian elements in society, badly affecting all aspects of human life, including environmental balance, and this began to be reflected in literary writings. Literature mirrors the human life and society of the respective era, and Dystopian fiction has been delineating earnest concerns and hazards for humanity in the near future. So, dystopian literature is not for sheer entertainment, but it has anticipated real-life developments much before they materialise. 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.

Keywords: Dystopian literature, oracular, social issues, premonitions, menaces, technological evolution, World Wars, catastrophe, accoutrement, externalisation

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 criticised 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 is an imagined bad place in the near future, characterised by corruption, destruction, totalitarian control, surveillance, oppression, dehumanisation, loss of privacy, and many other negative factors that are fatal to human well-being and society. Dystopia is the exact opposite of Utopia, depicting an idealised, perfect place that can never exist in reality. The term Utopia was introduced by Sir Thomas More in his book of the same title, published in 1516. Over time, many novels depicting Utopian and Dystopian elements came into vogue. However, this study focuses on how dystopian literature foreshadows potential disasters and destruction, as well as social and moral degeneration in the years ahead, by analysing a few significant dystopian novels.

Critical Analysis:

1. Fahrenheit 451 :

Published in 1953, the novel was written by Ray Bradbury. It was written during the Second Red Scare, aka McCarthyism. It was the period of intense anti-communist fear and persecution in America, which was named after Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was characterised by political repression and persecution of left-wing individuals and a campaign spreading fear of communism, suppression of thoughts, etc. We find 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 firefighters are assigned to burn books rather than extinguish fires. The title refers to the temperature at which a paper catches fire and begins to burn. The protagonist of the novel is Guy Montag, a fireman who initially burns books but, over time, begins questioning his society's suppression of knowledge. So, the burning of books resonates with McCarthy's process of thought control, which suppresses people's views.

At one moment, Guy Montag says, "We have everything we need to be happy, but we are not 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 understands that happiness cannot come from material things or artificial entertainment alone.

Gradually, Montag starts to realise the emptiness within and 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 cannot imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You do not stay for nothing." (Page no. 48) When Montag sees that a woman chooses to burn with her books. It serves as a crucial awakening for him, and he understands that books must have something profoundly valuable if someone is willing to die for them.

Another important character in the novel is Mildred Montag, Guy's wife, a deeply absorbed television viewer and thus thoroughly disconnected from reality and society. She is interested in artificial entertainment and has no connection to genuine feelings. She is scared of books and knowledge. She says, "Books are not people. You read and I

look around, but there is not 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 on TV as her family.

This novel foreshadows many aspects of contemporary life. People fall prey to depression very easily after being disconnected from the world. However, 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 on his book collection. She considers knowledge to be 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 because we can experience these things in our lives and around us, themes the novel explores. It talks about censorship and intellectual suppression as books are burnt. This shows that free thinking and knowledge are prohibited. "A pen is mightier than the sword", so books are considered as perilous as they can trigger a rebellious attitude among people. The government very smartly eliminates such challenges and complex ideas. Moreover, we see that advanced technology makes people isolate themselves from their families and society. They are immersed in large wall-sized television screens, enjoy spending time on social media, and lack necessary human interaction, which we can see everywhere across all age groups. Consequently, we have an increased rate of breakups, divorces, and no mutual understanding at all! The novel also sheds light on the theme of knowledge vs. Ignorance. It speaks to the significance of knowledge, curiosity, critical thinking, and learning. These are essential to human dignity, where blind conformity to everything is shown to be fatal. Today, we see that people do not question anything because they are ignorant of what is happening around them. They are absorbed in artificial entertainment programmes on TV, laptops, computers, mobiles, and so forth; they look alienated from society and reality. They do not live in real life; they live in reel life... fake life!

2. Feed:

The next significant novel, 'Feed', published in 2002 by M.T. Anderson, is a remarkably dystopian work that speculates on the disasters of ubiquitous social media,

targeted advertising, and neural interfaces. This novel was published before the advent of smart phones and contemporary social media, and it portrays a shocking, terrible picture of the future, where constant digital connectivity has drastically changed the human psyche and society. This novel is set in future America. It revolves around Titus, a teenager, and his relationship with Violet. She rebels against the feed-dominated culture. When a hacker temporarily turns off their feeds, 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 the potential consequences of technological developments on human beings and society. It also shows the considerable decline in critical thinking, communication skills, and proper human attachment. It also poses questions about the place of technology in our lives and whether technology ultimately serves to enhance or diminish our humanity and morality. Today, we witness that even in the face of a calamity, disaster, or accident, people are eager to record the scene or capture a picture rather than rush to the victim's rescue.

The novel is rife with advertising, constantly bombarding users with targeted messages designed to compel them to consume more and more. The novel criticises consumerism and its influence on people and society, emphasising how it can lead to a loss of individuality, environmental imbalance, and social degradation. The novel depicts how the environment is neglected and damaged by overconsumption. The characters are mostly indifferent to these things, concerned only with the superficial pleasures and distractions caused by technological feeds. The novel warns of environmental disasters and aims to raise readers' awareness of the need to protect the ecosystem. At present, we are facing urgent issues arising from climate change, including disruptions to the seasonal cycle and the emergence of new viral and bacterial diseases. This novel also shows the characters' apathetic attitude towards nature and the environment.

Furthermore, the novel throws light on the loss of identity and individuality, as characters are so addicted to technology that they are unable to define anything beyond

the parameters set by the feed and its advertisements. The novel explores the challenges of maintaining one's identity in a world where technology and consumer culture have become pervasive. It also expresses the dehumanisation of characters in the digitised 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. On social media, we see people use slang and abbreviated language that is very superficial and lacks 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 a very thought-provoking novel that explores the looming threats posed by unstoppable, uncontrolled technological advancements, consumer culture, and environmental degradation. It serves as a cautionary tale, admonishing readers to take a critical stance against technology and its adverse impact on humanity and society. So, the novel relates to the contemporary scenario in which people are seen tied to technological gadgets, closely connected to every technological update, and are depicted as fearful 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, at the beginning of the story, accepts everything regarding food without question; he defines himself and everything around him through consumption, and reveals emotional hollowness. However, after meeting Violet, an intelligent, anti-consumerist individual, Titus develops a capacity for deeper emotions, questions uncomfortable truths, and experiences a genuine connection with her. Through Titus's character, the novelist seeks to help readers understand the negative impact of feeds and advertisements on individuals and to help them avoid getting stuck in the quicksand of these technological delusions.

3. This Perfect Day:

A technocratic dystopian novel by American writer Ira Levin was published in 1970 and explores, superficially, the themes of individual freedom, technological control, and human resistance to a perfect yet tyrannical societal system. The novel is set in a

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 that they will remain satisfied and cooperative family members. They are directed to follow a specific life routine, 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 that acts as a scanner; through it, UniComp gains access to them and tells them where to go and what to do. At the age of 62, everyone is euthanised by Uni with an overdose of medicines. People are made to believe that at the age of 61 or 63, an older adult dies of natural causes. The long-lived men and women are the invisible yet real world government living in their hiding places.

Chip (Li RM35M4419) is the central figure in the novel, with distinct light hair and heterochromia (i.e., different-coloured eyes). Initially programmed and compliant, receiving continuous medication and abiding by UniComp's rules, he gradually rebels against the computer-controlled society and sets himself free from conditioning. After meeting Wei, his mentor, he becomes aware of the artificiality of his world. He 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 include continuous medication that regulates people's emotions and behaviour, the suppression of individual thoughts and desires, and the creation of artificial harmony in society. Secondly, it explores technological surveillance in which the supercomputer UniComp governs all aspects of human life, with no personal privacy. This novel has anticipatory elements which parallel contemporary issues.

4. Brave New World:

The novel, written by English author Aldous Huxley and published in 1932, is a dystopian work set in a futuristic World State where human reproduction and society are controlled by advanced technology. The world State maintains equilibrium through genetic engineering, psychological manipulation, and a rigid social hierarchy. The

society depicted in the novel is characterised by the creation of test tube babies and their conditioning as per their pre-determined social class; children 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.

Hypnopaedia, a term coined by Huxley in the novel, refers to the practice of continuously playing recorded messages to teach individuals while they sleep. In the story, the World State employs hypnopaedia to inculcate and shape its people from childhood, shaping their attitudes, choices, and behaviours 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 an unethical and dangerous technological advancement through which you can design the baby biologically, which is against nature and has its potential dangers.

Conclusion:

In this way, the study shows that dystopian literature is not merely for sheer entertainment, but also speculates and mirrors burning concerns of the contemporary world, and warns readers and audiences to think critically about it and endeavour to find solutions to the same.

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