

THE CONTENDING REALITIES AND FUTURE VISIONS: A STUDY IN THE CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN INCLINATION

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Abstract:

Today's reality creates a silhouette of the future in a vivid way. No one can predict the future but one can envisage the future by perceiving the present world through various outlooks. Today's world is scarred as mankind is depriving the nature of valuable resources. Is nature alone suffering? Definitely not; man too is tainted. All around one can find politics, power games and countless conflicts to survive. In the contemporary movies, fictions, and blockbusters, one finds Science Fiction and Dystopian depictions of the future. Bearing in mind the present drift one can hardly think of an ideal world. Young adult (YA) literature is on the rise again. In the paper, an attempt has been made to identify the reasons and sources for the present inclination to a dystopian future and how it has left an intense impression on people.

Keywords: *Dystopian Literature, Young Adult Literature, Apocalypse, Future, Artificial Intelligence, Media, Survival.*

Introduction:

Human reason can excuse any evil; that is why it's so important that we don't rely on it (Divergent, p. 102).

The dystopian popularity in the current vogue is extremely unexpected, bizarre, and swift. From being a relegated genre it has come out of the blue in the pop culture with surprisingly millions of readers especially the young adults. No one can explain this sudden fad for young adult dystopian literature not until one delves deep into its themes and concepts. The rise in a genre can be only possible if it connects with the reality of today. Dystopia's literal meaning is a 'bad place' and it is said to be the opposite of Utopia, which is an ideal world. With the changing climate, geography and the nature around us, one always assumes the worst. Also, the dilapidated plane on which the world hangs in terms of war and peace has driven many to consider a world of chaos. One doesn't know what will ensue in the days to come and this unpredictability harbours fear and consequently makes the people turn to a dystopian trail.

The bestsellers of today include the *Hunger Games* trilogy, the *Divergent* trilogy, *The Maze Runner* series, *Matched* trilogy, *Shatter Me* series and other dystopian tales. Even the classics of this genre are gaining popularity like the *We*, 1984, *Brave New World*, *The Giver*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and many more. Their adaptations into movies and dramas have skyrocketed its prominence in the young adults and the adults alike. Through these dystopian and post-apocalyptic books and their adaptations in the cinema, one can see its mirror image in our present world and that is precisely the reason for its startling popularity.

With the inexplicable rise of the dystopian young adult literature, one can comprehend the impact that these tales have imprinted on the minds of people. The existing reality shapes the future visions. The sync it creates with the present world and the young adult minds will be studied and the interest it has designed in the people will be explored in the paper. Also, the novels *Hunger Games* trilogy and *The Maze Runner* series would be compared and studied with the young adult minds so as to comprehend its appeal

and fame in today's world.

Today's World and its Dystopian Resemblance:

The knowledge of the modern world and its experiences eventually creates a future through the course of time. The past errors always serve as a lesson for the future generation to not fall under its allure. In the past we have seen great dystopias in real-life, some were naturally created through some natural disasters, and some were terrorist attacks and man-made disasters, while some were a really terrifying totalitarian government like the Nazi German and the Stalinist Russia and many others were war-related like the World Wars. All these dystopian-like realities served as a warning for the future. Learning from these past experiences, today's world should be going on a better path. Instead, contemporary writers are envisioning a bleak future. And astonishingly people today are finding an affinity with these dystopian tales.

Today's world overtly seems better as people are living in perfectly comfortable places. But not until one sees the mar or dent lurking underneath the system does one realize its duplicity. The rich have fun while the poor are battling in the game of life. Poverty, Corruption, Politics, Power-Control Wars, Caste systems, Race, Gender Issues and many other impediments are rapidly increasing day-by-day. The government of today is playing the game of power and the possible threats and rebels are silenced forever. Money and greed have taken over many people that they are blinded from the truth. Many innocent people are caught up in the deception and lies of the higher-ups. Due to all these miseries, the suicide rate is growing higher and higher in today's world.

Media today is being used as an instrument or a weapon of destruction. Everything on-screen is full of deceit and lies. The truth of the matter is seen only in reality. Natural disasters have drastically augmented. Man is draining the Earth of its resources and pollution and global warming is escalating. The advancement in science and technology has led to certain developments but the fallout of it is lucidly visibly about. Alice Trupe states in *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*:

Social trends that we see around us, such as increased conformity, and the development of technology, such as “weapons of mass destruction” and genetic alteration, as well as the dangers inherent in disregard for the environment, suggest frightening futures. Thus most tales depicting the future are cautionary tales, meant to alert readers to the potential negative outcomes of current actions. Such tales are often frightening... (125)

All of these consequently points to a dystopian path. “Pick your present-day dilemma; there's a new dystopian novel to match it” says Jill Lepore in her article *A Golden Age For Dystopian Fiction*. When people think about all these truths of the world, a pessimistic world alone can be pictured. Authors of today thus have observed it all and have imagined such future visions that are bleak, dangerous and ubiquitous with chaos. The appeal for these tales does not lie alone in the plot but also in the trace of hope that it delivers in the end.

Young Adult (YA) Mind and the Future Milieu:

Young adult literature which was side-lined before has now upgraded and become the pop culture. It is due to the fact that these tales are closely related to the minds of the young adults. The dystopian genre in young adult rose in popularity with novels such as the *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner* and many more. These tales though abound with bleakness and horror, it poignantly brings out the young adult nature in a precise manner. The protagonist of the novel would go through all the troubles faced by a young adult and still would come out triumphantly. Such tales thus help the young adults or teens to fight their pain and fears and be confident and successful in their life.

Teens generally go through the feeling of loneliness and depression. They think differently and are often rebellious in nature. Some teenagers have trouble fitting in with their peers and school and some are bullied and they have a hard time grappling with reality. Many falls into addictions and some are prone to harm their own self. Certain teens get too much in depression that it eventually leads them to commit

suicide. Young adults, therefore, face many problems and fears and they try hard to grapple with life. These dystopian stories though pessimistic, like their phase of life, it basically gives them a hope to survive and to fight and to live.

Young adult literature “is classically a literature of the outsider” (Trupe, 108) as the hero of the novels is divergent from the others. Many gruesome factors would be put before the protagonist and the decision-making skills would be tested thoroughly. They will be given a choice, albeit it would not be the truth. If they defy the government, then trouble would come from anywhere, even from their own family. They will be determined, rebellious and resilient and will always fight for the good of the people. All the main characters would be running away from danger throughout the novel and eventually, some hope would be restored.

The problem of conforming to the rules is one of the major issues of a teenager. They always try to break the rules and never follow along with the plans of the adults. They want their own freedom and they try to build their own life with their own efforts. Analogous to this, one finds that the dystopian tales contend with the issue of conformity. The government in such tales would always want the people to conform to their rules and abide by their word but the insurgent people would defy it all and try to gain freedom, no matter the cost.

Finding an identity for themselves drives a teen to look everywhere for a sense of belongingness. The idea of identity also is visibly seen in these dystopian tales. Also, the fear of the unknown is portrayed in these novels, which is akin to a young adult's dilemma over what to choose next in life and the fear of making the wrong choices.

Analysing the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, one can discover that its plot lucidly relates to the young adults. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the novel, is a dashing sixteen-year-old who provides for her family by illegally hunting in the woods. Her world is a post-apocalyptic one called Panem, which is divided into twelve Districts, with the Capitol being the centre. All the twelve districts are given various tasks and they are rewarded according to their work. District 12 is the poorest of all districts as the people there are coal miners and it is where Katniss resides. Each year the Capitol conducts a live game, where the twenty-four (two from each District) tributes are made to fight each other until one survivor remains. To survive in this deadly contest, the competitors must employ a combination of strength, cunningness and determination to win.

This is where Katniss Everdeen ends up after volunteering herself for her sister, Primrose in the seventy fourth annual hunger games reaping. In Panem, the Hunger Games are an annual event in which young boys and girls fight to the death in a televised battle. It is an ultimate game of kill or be killed. Katniss and Peeta Mellark are chosen from her district and are made ready for the game. They are treated as the property of Capitol. The game changes the person's character as they are made to do anything to survive. Katniss resents it all and she does things out of the ordinary. Peeta, her co-tribute loves her and helps her in many ways but he struggles with identity a lot, as being a baker he is innately kind and generous and doesn't want to kill. He says to Katniss, “I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not.” (Collins, 141) Peeta also says, “Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games.” (Collins, 142) All this make Katniss to think and she doesn't play by the rules of the game. She shows how different and how strong she is in the games and eventually she and Peeta Mellark, with whom she plays romance for a show, come out as victors from District 12 by defying the rules with just some deadly berries.

This was supposed to be the end, but President Snow, the cunning ruler of Panem would never let this act of defiance be the end because now Katniss had become the face of rebellion. In the next hunger games, he puts out a rule that only from the victors of the games, the tributes would be chosen. This infuriates Katniss and she knows that this time only one could win, so she decides to save Peeta. That is why in *Catching Fire*, she teams up with some tributes but in the games, everything turns topsy-turvy as the

rebellion group from District thirteen, which was supposed to be obliterated, intervenes and saves her from the games to put an end to the vicious games.

In the course of the novel, Katniss' whole district is wiped out but her family and friends are saved. But the thought of Peeta, who was captured by the Capitol, leaves a scar so deep that she becomes mentally disturbed. With the help of her trainer, Haymitch and others, she stands up for the rebellion in *Mockingjay* and she unites the districts to stop the Capitol. Battling Peeta and President Coin, the leader of the rebellion, Katniss eventually brings down President Snow. Even after they had won, when Katniss divulges that President Coin is no different than Snow, she kills Coin and later lives in her own district with Peeta, who is still traumatized and never the same.

The story of Katniss Everdeen thus inspires young adults to be resilient and fight for their own identity. It is wrought efficiently by the author to portray the struggles of a teenager and how the games of power can cause the utmost disorder. Blending the tale with the reality shows of today, the author pictures how such a world could be the future.

On the other hand, *The Maze Runner* series by James Dashner is a cliff-hanging tale of a teenager named Thomas, who is betrayed, threatened by an organization ironically christened as 'WICKED' and put in a labyrinth to solve the unseen things that occur one by one with no quell button. But in every action of his, a drive to survive and to be free is visible and it ultimately leads him to a safe haven. The milieu of the series is a post-apocalyptic one where the sun flares have devastated everything. On top of that, the avarice to survive makes the government take a horrible decision that is to pass 'the kill order' by administering a deadly virus. This goes haywire and it eventually creates the cranks as the Flare virus mutates and destroys a human's brain making one go completely crazy like a zombie.

With Thomas, there are a couple of teenagers who fight for freedom. They are called Gladers as they live in the Glade with the Grievers, a creature with protruding spikes, a blend of real and machine. Their determination to escape the walls leads them out, but it is not the end. They are the lab rats for WICKED (World in Chaos Killzone Experiment Department) and they won't stop until they find the cure. After what seems to be the end, the real beginning begins and the scorch trails take place. During this they escape out of the clutches of WICKED, only to find that everywhere else, the fight for survival continues as the virus mutates. However, in the end, the astute plan of Thomas' works and somehow the immunes take a Flat Trans (a transporting device) to a new and a free place. The other two prequels in the *Maze Runner* series tell the story of the how the Flare Virus spread and also how the maze was built. It is certainly a tale abounds with horror and repulsion, but still a tiny seed of hope flickers and that hints them to survive.

The government in this novel would do anything to outlive the virus. The urge to live drives the scientists to even go to the extent of killing. When the solution becomes a disaster, then everything is under one power which holds the key to the problem. But when they are corrupted, only the cure matters and the innocent lives of the subjects doesn't carry any value. They are simply tossed about and made to conform to their ideas through manipulation and control over their minds. Selfishness propels them to act without a thought and many lives end up still and cold. The dystopia it creates is bleak, dark, vicious, poor and negative. "But what really reeks is stark naked barbarism: the perfumed scents of civility are but a distant memory. We have reverted to savagery, animality, and monstrosity. And then, perhaps mercifully, the end comes" (Claeys 4).

These tales thus are rampant with negativity but it undeniably matches with the young adult's nature and that is why dystopia has found a connection with our world. Greg Boose, in his article, *Are Dystopian Novels Here to Stay* says that Tahereh Mafi, the author of *Shatter Me* series believes it's dark optimism that drives the YA book market: "I think that's what makes it such a safe place for young people to explore their burgeoning understanding of darkness in the world. The realization that there is, in fact, evil in the world is a realization that's so unique to that coming-of-age experience-it makes dystopian novels evergreen. There will forever and ever be young people growing up and grappling with the harsh realities

of the world.

Similar to the milieu of the future visions, the young adult mind functions and this leads to the dystopian drift of today's pop culture. Its charisma and its spellbound quality will never dwindle until the reality changes.

Conclusion:

In the article, *The Trump Dystopian Nightmare: Nuclear War, Climate Change and a Clash of Civilizations Are All on the Horizon* John Feffer and Tom Dispatch say, "As novelist Junot Diaz argued last October, dystopia has become 'the default narrative of the generation.'" No one can deny this. Even in India, we have dystopian tales such as *Leila* (Prayaag Akbar), *The Many Lives of Ruby Iyer* (Laxmi Hariharan) and the like. Dystopian tales blend both the present and the future in a perfect composition.

Contemporary cinema is rife with dystopian and Sci-fi genres. We see Artificial Intelligence taking control of the human race, the depletion of man creating mutants, humans with powers of their own, living in space and planets like Mars, robots destroying living beings, humans divided into groups and confined and many more. Today's society is full of cyborgs part human and part machine. Dr. R. B. Chougule writes about contemporary sci. fi. Novel:

The fiction of 1980s and 1990s depict role of the cyborg in the face of technological development. Many of the cyberpunk science fiction of eighties reflect nervousness in the face of advanced technology, depicting a contested space between the human and the technological...Cyborgs willingly trap themselves inside the endless landscape of the virtual. It presents human-machine amalgamations that are comprised not just of skin and alloy, circuits and signals, images and Lacanian imaginaries but parallel to the cyborg's contemporary manifestation as super-powered killing machine...(Chougule 34).

Even dystopian novels are now adapted into movies. Recently *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Darkest Minds* came out as movies. As one reads these tales, it gives a feeling and an impression that we too are fighting together with the protagonist. Its charm does not lie alone with the young adults but it reaches the adults too as "The task of the literary dystopia, then, is to warn us against and educate us about real-life dystopias. It need not furnish a happy ending to do so: pessimism has its place. But it may envision rational and collective solutions where irrationality and panic loom" (Claeys, 501).

Elizabeth Neoman in her article, *In the era of Trump, dystopian literature makes a comeback* opines that, "Dystopian literature can be a starting point for conversations about our current political state, providing important insight into politics and motivating us to investigate the conflicts presented in these novels in an effort to improve our own society." Dystopias thus have become a trend in our times and through its utterly futile worlds, it makes a person divulge our world and take steps to change it and fight for individuality.

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