



Theoretical Framework and Thematic Concerns in Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract

The term dystopia can be defined in relation to word utopia. Dystopia is simply anti-utopia or counter utopia. Utopia is good place, but also nonexistent place. Utopias are too good to be existent in this world. The origin of dystopian fiction can be traced back to the science fiction popularized by H.G. Wells. The rise of authoritarian and totalitarian governments, the curtailment of freedom, class division, and climate change gave impetus to dystopian writings. The advancement in science and technology also encouraged the development of dystopian fiction. Generally dystopias are set in the distant future. Some of the common themes in dystopian fiction are hazards of climate change, extinction of human race, the threat of nuclear war, and the exploitation of humans by absolutist governments. The rise of the machines is another common theme in it. They are also a satirical commentary and potent attack on contemporary political and social condition. Aldus Huxley, David Mitchell, Suzanne Collins, Ray Bradbury are some of the prominent writers of dystopian fiction in English.

Key words

Utopia, dystopia, science fiction, absolutist governments, human extinction, commentary, speculative writings, science and technology, future, aliens.

Introduction

Science fiction in English was popularised by H.G. Wells in the first half of 20th century. With the new discoveries in science and technology more and more books of science fiction came into existence. As we all know the setting of science is generally in distant future. Utopian and dystopian writings are sub-genres of science fiction. So before looking at these two, lets define the science fiction. But science fiction is not defined in clear terms yet. Science fiction is one of the major genre in English fiction. It is also known as speculative writing or speculative fiction. Science fiction depicts imaginative, ideal alternative ways of living for human beings. Moreover, all speculative writings present a futuristic, scientifically advanced society in the distant or near future. In fact rapid developments in Science and Technology give impetus to science fiction. Most important feature of science fiction is that it is set in some other world- other than the earth. It might be a different universe, planet or its setting might also be the earth in a far distant future. As regards the characters in science fiction they are different than humans- advanced robots with artificial intelligence, aliens, other extra terrestrial creature, machines or most advanced human being. As it's name suggests science fiction explore the effects of innovations and discoveries in Science and technology on human race, bad as well as good. It depicts a society structured on new scientific principle. There is also a new political system depicted in science fiction. Lastly there is a conflict between good and evil in science fiction. This conflict is between two cultures, between humans and aliens, between creatures on another planet and human or some natural and environment catastrophe.

Characteristics of Utopian Fiction

The origin of the word Utopia can be traced to a Greek word which means 'no place' or 'no where land'. As far as literature is concerned Thomas More used it for first time for fictional world he described in his book. The meaning of the word Utopia kept on changing and many more words were formed using utopia as a base such as dystopia anti- Utopia etcetera. George Kateb defines Utopian Society as

" Utopian society in which all conflicts of conscience and conflicts of interest are abolished..... all the obstacles to a decent life for all men have been removed..... the resourcefulness of modern technology is put in the unfettered service of lessening labour and increasing in enriching labour with "peace, abundance, and virtue permanently and universally obtained."

The utopia is a place of dream. It is a place which offers full freedom without any constraints. Every individual gets all the opportunities in the world to develop his potential. In utopian society every individual is of equal rank. There is no discrimination on basis of caste, creed, gender or race in utopian society. It is a classless society. There are no poor or rich in a utopian society as all are economically equal there. The concept of private property is alien to utopian people. As there is no private property there is no competition, discontentment or jealousy. Every man gets proper education in a utopian society. So utopia symbolise an ideal or perfect place or condition for humans to live in. The life in a utopian society is perfectly structured without any flaws, wants. So utopia is a good place but no place. It is an ideal place which exists nowhere to be found in this world or another world.

But all these good attractive qualities and conditions nowhere to be found in this world and as such utopias are too good to be found somewhere in the world. Utopia is too much positive and that makes it improbable and impracticable. It's goodness and idealness is practically makes it nonexistent society. But some believe those utopias are unrealizable. In short, a utopian society is a society where there is no war, oppression, exploitation, disease, poverty class war and prejudices. Plato's *Republic* (360 BC) laid down the foundation of Utopian writing in western society. The first Utopian novel in English is Thomas More's *Utopia* published in 1516. In it More presents an ideal society. He depicts a society which is perfect in all the ways. The society presented in the novel is without any poverty, class war or diseases.

Characteristics of Dystopian Fiction

The origin of the word dystopia is also traced back to the Greek prefix 'dys' which means 'bad' or 'harsh'. Greek root 'topo' means place". So dystopia is a bad harsh place. Dystopia can be defined only in relation to the word utopia. It is anti- utopia or counter-utopia. The origin of dystopia lies in fact in the utopia itself. The perfect world depicted in utopia would ultimately someday turn into dystopia. All the idealisation in a utopia turns on its head and ideal society becomes tyrannical and oppressive. So dystopias are perverted utopias. Utopias are set in the future and dystopias are inspired by socio- political- economic reality of the present and are also set in near or distant future. Let us first define the dystopia. M. H. Abrams defines dystopia in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* in these words:

"The term dystopia(bad place) has recently come to be applied to the works of fiction, including science fiction, that represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination."(Abrams, 776)

April Spisak defines dystopia in her book *What Makes a Good Dystopian Novel* as

" dystopia's are characterized as a society that is Counter- Utopia, repressed, controlled restricted system with multiple social controls put into place via government, military or a powerful authority figure"(Spisak,78)

Dystopias are a satirical commentary on contemporary political system and socio economic condition. There is a great scientific advancement in society but the scientific advancement are used by evil force for controlling and exploiting the society. Generally authoritarian and absolutist governments had full control on lives of its citizen

in dystopian societies. So we find that there is one party government in dystopian society. Technology is used extensively for constant surveillance of society. Dystopian regimes expect loyalty from its citizen. In some cases an alien is shown to be ruling the humans. All rights and freedom of humans is taken away by authoritarian regimes. Brutal force, fear of extinction is always present in the minds of people in dystopian society.

Dystopian fiction is also political allegories. They warn readers about mechanism of absolutist governments. They teach how such governments take away freedom and rights of the people and force them into slavery. Conflict is the soul of dystopian fiction. The protagonist rebels against the totalitarian government. But protagonist and other positive characters are a minority in dystopian fiction. The protagonist rebels against the ruthless force and system of government. Either he dies or sent into exile in some other world. The individuals are powerless before the absolutist government and suffer paranoia and live in fear. There is a strict control on dissemination of information and knowledge in dystopian fiction. There is total control of government on all the media. Religious books are in the hands of government. Art, culture, literature, education and entertainment are all used for the propaganda of ruling party.

Dystopian fiction deals with some common thematic concerns. Often it deals with an alien invasion and control of the earth. Then some deal with the change in climate and the danger it poses to human kind. Climate change may lead to the extension of human race. It warns against the climate change and its deadly consequences for human race. The rise of robot, machines and artificial intelligence is another theme in it. There is dreadful picture of robots and machines taking over lives of humans. The fury of nature and natural calamities such as volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, viruses, fungi and meteorite and its effect on human life is another common theme in dystopian fiction. The threat of nuclear war and total destruction of the earth is another thematic concern in dystopian science fiction. In 21st century world is plagued by terrorism. So terrorist attack is also a prominent theme in dystopian fiction. Individual freedom has no place in it as citizens are conformist and loyal. The citizens are under constant surveillance. Nature doesn't play a prominent role in this. Innovations and discoveries in Science and Technology and its use for surveillance, oppression and exploitation of the people is a common theme in dystopian fiction. Keith Booker in his book *Dystopian Literature* gives following characteristic features dystopian society.

“Dystopian Literature generally constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the Utopian premises upon which these conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those condition and system into different context that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradiction. (Booker,3)

Dystopian Novels

1. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004)

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is a novel which consists of 6 interrelated short stories. The narrative structure of the novel is very complicated as well as each stories beginning and end depends on each other. The story number five *An Orison of Sonmi~451* is a dystopian story. The story is set in distance future in 22nd second century in 2144 where there is destruction on earth everywhere. Most part of the earth is not suitable for living due to high level of radiation. Only some parts of the Asia are habitable. On those habitable patches is situated the Corporate State of Sopros. The central plot of the story consists of an interview between archivist of the ministry of testimonial and *Sonmi~451*. *Sonmi~451* is a genetically engineered man. He is a slave and works as a waiter in a restaurant named Papa Songs Diner. *Sonmi~451* decides to fight against the system of fabricants. She was joined by some fabricants. But she failed in her fight at the end and was punished with execution. The society of the Corporate State of Sopros was highly structural. There are two classes in the society --production and consumers.

At the highest strata of the society are Chairman and his Board of Advisors. At the lowest strata are Untermensch. Any citizen who doesn't confirm to government norms is sent to this lowest strata which consists

of slums. Microchips are installed in each individual for surveillance purpose. Fabricants are without any soul. They don't have any freedom and go only to their work place.. The fabricants are killed and recycled at a place called papa songs Golden ark. The fabricants are colonized and their only purpose is to serve the purebloods. They work for 19 hours a day without any contact with outside world. They are always told that they have to pay back by working hard. So they are labour and even after death their bodies are used and recycled to produce more fabricants. So oppression and exploitation is the only fate of every fabricants. So fabricants are just like machines working as slaves of rich people. So the novel shows dehumanised people without any identity or individuality or freedom. It presents gloomy stark picture of absolutist regimes where people are just dehumanised machines, workforce and slaves.

2. Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World*

Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World* is an important dystopian novel. It was published in 1932. In this novel human beings are not born naturally but are produced by machines programmed and conditioned already before birth. The society in this novel is highly structured and stratified. The novel is set in distant future in 2546. Human beings are made by machines and so they are not akin to human feelings such as love, sympathy or familial values. They don't need food to sustain but live on a drug called Soma. As stated above, society in this world is structured very rigidly. The people in this society are divided into—Alphas, Betas, Gamma and Deltas. Everything in this world happens now and everybody is always happy by taking the drug Soma. In this hierarchy Alphas and betas are privileged cast. On the other hand Gamas, deltas and epsilons belong to the lowest strata of the society. They do all the manual, physical work without questioning or doubt.

Class or cast of each individual is determined even before their birth and they have to stick to this class throughout their live. Epsilons are Produced in large numbers to do manual work. They are conditioned to work continually. So they are not individuals but machine slaves. They are programmed in such a way that they never question their station in life. They are engineered not to question the authority. Unrestricted consumption and unlimited production is the another feature of this society. When John the savage enters this *Brave New World*, he tries to break this society into awareness.

3. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)

Like in all dystopian fiction the novel *Fahrenheit 451* is set in the future. The government in this dystopian novel provides anything and everything to the citizens except freedom and free thinking. They are denied individuality free thinking and debate. Guy Montag is the protagonist of the novel. He works as a fireman. But his duty is to burn the books. There are also other firemen whose only responsibility is to burn books wherever and whenever they found them. The government burns the books because they are afraid of knowledge, imagination and creativity in the citizens and wants them to be in the perpetual state of ignorance. They fear that books will create awareness and will bring about a rebellion against the government. The government, apart from fireman, has created a unique mechanical, a mechanical hound, which has ability to sniff and kill people who read the books. There are also other mechanisms to keep people under constant surveillance and find out any form of rebellion breeding in the society.

4. Suzanne Collins *The Hunger Games* (2008)

The Hunger Games was published in 2008. *The Hunger Games* is a trilogy and all three novels contain dystopian elements. The story of *The Hunger Games* begins after destruction of the present human civilization. The name of the country is Pahem which consists of Capitol which is the main governing body and other twelve districts. The capitol has destroyed one district because of rebellion by using a mutated animal named 'Tracker Jackers'. Every district has assigned a different kind of work. These twelve districts are kept apart and people in these districts cannot communicate with each other. While people in capitol lead a luxurious life all the twelve districts suffer from poverty and starvation and hunger.

The protagonist of the novel Katniss Everdeen also came from a very poor family. Her father died in a blast in coal mines. Independent thinking is banned and people in all the districts were always keep under surveillance by peacekeepers. If a person commits any wrong she was brought to Capitol, his tongue would be

cut and he had to spend rest of his life as a slave in the capitol. The Hunger Games were organised in capitol every year for the amusement and enjoyment of the rich people. Each district has to provide to competitors to take part in the Hunger Games. They are called as tribute. The tribute had to fight against each other until one of them gets killed. The winner of the hunger games gets a lot of food as prize. The people of Capitol came to see the Hunger Games as form of enjoyment and amusement where people kill each other for getting the food. This is the irony in the novel. Some people's hunger and starvation and killing each other is another peoples amusement and enjoyment. So the novel is potent attack on disparity and division in the society as well as totalitarian government which do nothing to bridge the gap between these two classes.

Conclusions/Findings

Both utopian and dystopian fictions are subgenres of science fiction. They are related terms and can be defined against each other. Simply put, dystopias are ant-utopias or counter utopias. Utopias are too good to be realizable and hence gave birth to dystopias. Science fiction emerged in early 20th century. In dystopian writing the story is generally set in the distant future. The lives of citizens are generally controlled by absolutist government. There is generally rule of one party in dystopian fiction. Threats of nuclear war, natural catastrophe, extinction of human race are some of the common thematic concern in dystopian fiction. There is a large scale use of technology for surveillance of people in dystopian fiction. Then dystopian society is very advanced in science and technology. All the novels studied in this research paper explicate these features of dystopian fiction.

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