



Quest for Morality: The Task of Dystopian Literature

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Abstract:

All literature is written for a purpose. Children's literature is written to enlighten the child reader. Food writing is written to entice and satisfy the cooks and the lovers of food. Dystopian literature is written for political and moral insight, among other reasons and purposes. This genre tries to show the readers the importance of morality, without explicitly referring to it. Morality is the foundation of any well-built society and dystopian literature shows the woes of a world without a proper foundation. The conscious reader is struck by the lack of morality in a corrupt world as portrayed in dystopian fiction. The paper looks into the beginnings of dystopian literature, into why and how this genre came into existence. It looks into the role of morality in society and mankind. It is a meditation on what the role dystopian literature is in the modern world.

Keywords: Dystopian literature, morality, knowledge, ideology

Dystopian literature has gained much popularity in recent times. It started with readers all over the world falling in love with *The Hunger Games* trilogy in 2008. Soon after that, publishers signed up similar dystopian stories for young adults, with a few modifications in themes and motifs (Miller). With the rise in popularity of this genre, one begins to wonder how relevant these dystopian novels are to modern readers. The primary defining factor of dystopian fiction is that it is set in a faraway future while confronting the social, political, environmental, and economic problems of the present. Dystopian writing showcases the intense, dramatic play between corruption and the need for reformation – in both the individual and the society. The paper will try to reveal how morality (or the lack of it) is at the heart of dystopian writing, because it deals with the moral devolution and the subsequent evolution of society and mankind.

The two World Wars (1914 – 1918 and 1939 – 1945) not only affect the physical aspect of the society, in terms of economic and spatial devastation but also the psychological. The ghost of the wars haunted the world and the people were struggling to deal with the traumatic after-effects. The morale of the people

was at an all-time and the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party had left a gaping wound in the collective consciousness of the world. In the aftermath of the monumental destruction caused by the wars, the task fell upon the writers, the poets, and the thinkers to make sense of the events, to help process the pain, and to teach their communities what they had to learn to avoid the repetition of a very painful history. Dystopian literature came into existence as a child of the Post-War era.

A good number of the Post-War novels share the same common defining features. These modern and post-modern writers mainly deal with trauma, alienation, industrialization, and urbanization among other themes, and show how different cultures respond to the changes that were forced into their lives. Industrialization and the increase in technological developments caused an alarming distrust of machines. The people generally looked at the future with dread and this is reflected in this genre. The writers took this fear and turned it into dystopian literature so that it can be an admonishment to the reader.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins creates a post-apocalyptic dystopian world called “Panem”. In Panem, there are districts that each produce and sell something valuable to the Capitol, a wealthy state, and its flourishing economy. Apart from a few districts, the rest of them are exploited and played by the government. The Capitol imposes various constrictions on the district people and ensures that the only problem they could afford to worry about is concerning a day’s meal. Most importantly, there is the annual “Hunger Games”, a barbaric, survival-of-the-fittest kind of competition where teenagers are pitted against each other in an outdoor arena where there can only be one victor. The whole thing is televised and treated like a sport.

In the *Divergent* series, Veronica Roth has written of a fictional futuristic society where people are sorted into one of the following five factions based on their aptitudes and the values they embody the most: Abnegation (selflessness), Dauntless (courage), Erudite (knowledge), Candor (honesty) and Amity (kindness). The teenagers in this conformist society have to choose one faction and they will be bound to it for the rest of their lives. Before their “Initiation Ceremony”, they have to take up a test that would show them which faction they are most suitable for. The test would also reveal if there are non-conformists who could fit-in in more than one category – who can be more than what they are expected to be. These people are called “Divergent” and are considered a threat to society because they have “healed genetics” and are therefore unknowingly a threat to the faction system.

Louis Althusser talks about Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) in his critical work called *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Althusser’s critique of society, being a Marxist philosopher who rejected humanism, seems to be a bleak one but one that makes perfect sense in a highly dysfunctional world. Both these apparatuses insinuate that human beings very rarely make choices that are independent of what is given to them. The mind of the common man is swayed by what is carefully shown to him, by what he is allowed to see by the dominant political power. So the corrupt government destroys the way to knowledge, limits the choices of the common man, or sometimes in desperation, gives no choice in the first place.

RSA refers to the use of violent force to ensure the cooperation of the citizens. Althusser writes that when a citizen refuses to be swayed, he is physically bullied into submission. This phenomenon is mostly seen in *The Hunger Games*, like in the case of the “Avox”. Citizens very rarely exercised their free will,

which means they had very little agency. The mastermind with the agenda, the one bullying, and his select few live a life of luxury. The rest are doomed by the dictator to suffer. In short, a dystopia is a place where the amoral and the immoral are in control and have already started driving society into destruction. The Avox in *The Hunger Games* are a minor group of people who have rebelled against the Capitol and have had their tongues cut out by, as they're ironically called – the “Peacekeepers”, the military in Panem. The Avox serve as a reminder that it is better for the people to be willing slaves to the Capitol in their districts, rather than be completely enslaved in service to the Capitol for the rest of their lives. A display of brute force and punishment strong enough to scare the rest into submission.

ISAs, however, are about coercion. The ruling party psychologically persuades or makes a mark in the common man's mind through media outlets, schools, public places, etc. Through observation, it becomes evident that in a dystopian world, the corrupt government goes after the people's morale first. The people are ideologically coerced and if necessary, physically berated into giving up their moral values for their safety. Ideological coercion is more subtle, like in the world of *Divergent*, where knowledge is simply out of reach. And what is out of reach, is mostly out of mind for the unconscious common man.

A secondary character named Matthew in Roth's *Allegiant* says, "Our ability to know about ourselves and the world is what makes us human." (Roth 219) Does this mean that in a dystopian world, where there is no real knowledge of self and the world, people are inhuman? While Matthew does not seem to understand the gravity of this statement, the conscious reader does.

The protagonist Tris gets to explore her identity in the last book of the series because she is labelled “genetically pure” by the government. Tobias, another primary character, is convinced that he is inherently flawed because the same government has labelled him “genetically damaged”. This skewed perception of himself troubles him and he struggles to embrace the fact that he could be more than just the sum of his genes. And that is exactly what human beings are – the sum of their genes, plus more, and the potential to be much more if one merely took the responsibility for himself/herself. The identity struggle that Tobias faces is related to the social conditioning that he has been subject to for a very long time.

The denying of the basic right to knowledge causes more damage than one might imagine. History gets re-written by the government in power. New, totalitarian ideologies, along with the distorted version of the truth, are fed to the citizens. Factual integrity means nothing because lies are more convenient for the proper functioning of the corrupt government (Broderick). This false “truth” is usually used as the basis for the new political and moral ideology in dystopian societies. Unadulterated knowledge is the truth. Where there is no room for proper knowledge – of the world and the self, there is no room for morality and moral values. Without the truth, there can be no morals. Universal truth lays the foundation for morality in the real world and the fictional one. Dystopian writers show the collateral damage that is caused by overlooking truth and knowledge.

In a desperate attempt to destroy knowledge, the dictator orders the books to be burned. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag says the following after he has been sent to burn the books in a house: “There must be something in books, things we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing.” (Bradbury 68) The old woman chose knowledge over ignorance in a world that calls for mindless collectivism. The ignorant are easier to control, after all. She

serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and the pursuit of knowledge in an ignorant society. A similar phenomenon can be seen in *Matched* by Ally Condie:

...the ones our Society chose to keep, back when they decided our culture was too cluttered. They created commissions to choose the hundred best of everything: Hundred Songs, Hundred Paintings, Hundred Stories, Hundred Poems. The rest were eliminated. Gone forever. For the best, the Society said, and everyone believed because it made sense. How can we appreciate anything fully when overwhelmed with too much? (Reyes 29)

The corrupt government limits and decides what literature/art people can read because it always views knowledge as a threat. And literature is a means of learning. The fear of the Society and the government in *Fahrenheit 451* is a valid yet cruel one for the immoral.

In any dystopian world, the critique is on the ruthless exploitation of man's free will. Human beings have intrinsic value and dignity. The ability to know and make good choices, and to be transformed by those choices is what helps us evolve. Without free will, society does not stand a chance at evolution (or devolution, one might argue, but let's look at the bright side). A troubled society that has no respect for free will dooms itself to destruction.

In conclusion, dystopian writing is about the conflict between corruption and reformation, knowledge and ignorance, constraint and freedom, and determinism and free will. The genre explores in extremities the greater conflict that dominates all of Literature: the conflict between good and evil. The term "in extremities" is used because these futuristic worlds are a meditation on what would happen if a society were to give in to great corruption. Corruption is present – to a troubling extent – even in the real world, but in these novels, we see the consequences of the same corruption left unchecked for too long. The heightened destruction portrayed in the fictional world is to repulse the reader of the microcosmic dysfunctionality in the present.

Dystopian novels awaken the readers into thinking about the cruelty that an immoral government and an amoral society are capable of. They ask the most important questions to the conscious reader: Are we to allow the state to make all our choices, to monitor our every word and deed? If the answer is no, then what is the importance of resilience and the pursuit of truth? What is the importance of acting upon the truth? How painful are the consequences when one does not act upon the truth? How does every man's individuality keep society from crumbling in on itself? These are questions that are meant to give the conscious reader the agency to act with prudence in the present and to avoid personal/political problems in the future.

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