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SCIENCE FICTION AND DYSTOPIA: A READING INTO RAY BRADBURY'S  
*FAHRENHEIT 451*

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ABSTRACT

Science fiction deals with imaginary yet plausible content such as space travels, aliens and future science and technology. Since its settings were always fictional, there was always a need for a considerable degree of suspension of disbelief. Science fiction was equated with pulp fiction and considered to be low category literature. Aristotle in his *Poetics* considered probability as the seminal criterion of serious work of art. But in the age of techno-culture the very term 'probable' is disputable. What was considered improbable a century ago is probable today? Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is a visible probability in the age of morphing. Science fiction novels try to create a sense of probability through utopias and dystopias where the weirdest of improbabilities has the chance of becoming unquestioned probabilities. Discussion about dystopia is incomplete without utopia. The reason behind the existence of utopia is man himself. Man is that animal who has tried to transcend himself as well as the limitations of nature imposed upon him by imagining a better future. This is reminiscent of the paradise of Garden of Eden unconsciously impressed upon his psyche. Dystopia explains what happens when the immaculate planning of utopia breaks down and backfires. This paper is an interesting travel through the pages of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* to unravel and decipher the elements of dystopia.

Keywords: Dystopia, sci-fi, future, censorship, imagination, knowledge, Ray Bradbury.

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Utopia is the blueprint for an ideal society where there is no crime and where everyone lives happily. This term was coined by Thomas Moore in his famous novel *Utopia in* 1915. Since then a number of authors have tried to portray various types of utopias. Like all other genres the dystopian genre that found a place of importance in literature, was a direct outcome of an antithesis to utopia and was instrumental in portraying autopia gone awry. Dystopia is the stark opposite to the term utopia. It is best described as the society that is undesirable and frightening. It is described as 'not a good place'. Dystopia was earlier called 'Cacotopia' meaning 'bad or wicked'. Both the terms utopia and dystopia are Greek in origin. Dystopia can be described

as an imaginary place where the condition of life is highly pathetic due to deprivation and terror. Hence dystopian novels are set in a futuristic world where one can find traces of the present world. This term was first coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868 during one of his parliamentary speeches. It was in the 1950's that utopian novels emerged as a genre. During 1899 H. G Wells published his first dystopian novella *The Story of Days to Come* and novel *When the Sleeper Walks*.

Utopias were born out of man's desire and imagination for a perfect society which was always unconsciously present in his psyche. But with the advent of the twentieth century these assumptions of utopia drastically changed-the First and Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were the reasons. Till the October Revolution there was a hope in the flawlessness of socialism that was evident in all utopian writings. Soviet Union failed to render into reality the radical transformation that it had promised. According to M. Keith Booker, the new technological advances of the twentieth century also contributed to the dystopian thought. Coupled with this was the invention of atom bomb. All these historical events challenged the concept of utopian paradise and brought disillusionment and fear about the future. An underlying fear emanated, that science would not have an entirely emancipating effect on humanity. There was also a fear that this scientific advancement could also cause suppression and subjugation of the human species. The earlier utopian thinking was also undermined by the fact that human nature was not as morally perfect as was believed accentuated by the discoveries in psychology and philosophy. Thus Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* was surprisingly the first dystopian novel of the twentieth century from the Soviet Union itself. Zamyatin used his novel to predict and warn the people of the Soviet Union about the repercussions of Stalin's rule. Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Ayn Rand, Margaret Atwood and Ray Bradbury were his followers. They all had their own reasons for the creation of dystopias. Till date Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is considered to be the best novel belonging to this genre. The fears of the possible outcome of the Industrial Revolution was the reason behind Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The humans inhabiting this world are conditioned to occupy their position in a society with caste system. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* is a noteworthy book belonging to this genre.

While the perfectly structured life of the utopia found a place of prominence in the works of utopian writers, the dystopian writers disbelieved the rigid planning and control of the utopian society. Through *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury imagines a futuristic society where the authorities curb knowledge and imagination in all forms by burning books. The firemen of this society is endowed with this work whenever they come across books. This is to ensure the destruction of creativity, imagination and creativity. The state portrays all books as dangerous and hence the burning of books. Her burning of books is symbolic of the destruction of creativity and imagination. It is through this procedure that the government maintains absolute control on its citizens. This society is reminiscent of a dystopian society located in a futuristic time and space which is non-existent. Thus it was the intention of Ray Bradbury to impress upon the readers that this society was dystopian in the sense that it was much worse than the actual world in which the reader lived.

The society of *Fahrenheit 451* was a technologically advanced one, where technology was effectively used to solely serve the interest of the state. The government media was used as a linchpin for the maintenance of a totalitarian society coupled with the perfect manipulation of its citizens. This totalitarian state was solely concerned with the destruction of imagination and knowledge as it would prove dangerous to the culture of conformity. For the state knew that rebellion always emanated out of the imagination of a different world from the one in which they were thriving. So the state was highly careful in the creation of individuals who were constantly under their submission. Thus dystopian world order gives rise to fear and dehumanised states that always tries to convert human beings into mechanised individuals who have no capacity for knowledge and imagination. The state thus dexterously creates a society where the people are misled to believe that they are extremely happy-a happiness without imagination and knowledge. Burning away of books is thus a covert method to ensure total submission. The intention of the state behind the burning of the books was to avoid the people from complicating their mind by reading unwanted and unnecessary books.

Another dystopian feature is The Mechanical Hound. It was a specially designed machine in the form

of a dog. It was trained and designed to sniff and find people who read books. Like a real hound it had the capacity to find people and kill them. It had eight legs and used to kill the person it caught by the use of morphine and procaine. It was the synonym of the legal system, except, that there was no hope of a fair trial. Thus The Hound was the product of the destructive power of technology and the epitome of evil. The Hound as its namesake was sincere towards its master in the sense that it was designed to live up to the expectations of the state to maintain their utopian ideal. The Hound thus thinks and does as the state desires and so is a strategically important weapon in the hands of the state. Thus the state exercises strict punishment through The Hound.

Guy Montag, the main character of this novel is also a fireman who takes pleasure in burning books. Guy Montage is satisfied with the present condition of things, until a seventeen year old girl named Clarisse McLellan arrives into his life. She is unable to adapt herself to value system of the present society. Her questioning of Guy's life with her sharp rebukes sets into motion the process of contemplation self-examination and reflection by Guy. Clarisse was in sharp contrast to his wife Mildred Montag, who did not possess a deep and inquisitive personality. She was only solely interested in watching television and was on drug abuse. Mildred had three parlour walls fitted with televisions and she wanted a fourth wall too fitted in the same way so that it gave an impression of a virtual reality.

The introspective nature of Clarisse makes Guy review his belief in the system to the extent that ultimately he becomes a fugitive. She questions about his way of life. Till her arrival he was a devoted worker of the state and follower of its rules. She possess an important question as to whether he was really happy. This proves to an important turning point of his life leading to his defiance. Clarisse thus proves to be a pivotal role in the novel thus subverting the grand narrative of the state with her analytical personality. Though the state tries to control imagination and knowledge there are some who retaliate. Professor Faber and Clarisse are some of them.

When Clarisse disappears, Professor Faber proves to be a consolation for Montag. Montag met him in a park where he was reading a book. Professor Faber was the only person with whom he could take about books. Professor Faber explains as to why books were made to be hated and feared and thus Montag gets an ally in Professor Faber. They later collectively decide to trap the firemen and create suspicion in the mind of their circle by arranging books in their houses. Later Professor Faber helps Montag to escape and he kills the trail. Captain Beatty in the beginning seems to be a mentor to Montag but it is during the final confrontation that his true identity is revealed. Captain Beatty is finally killed by Montag which is a symbolic representation of the success of Montag over the manipulative state, Ultimately Montag manages to escape the system and the system fools its people by telling that Montag is dead. Meanwhile Montag succeeds to join the Book People signifying a positive note of the creation of a new and better society different from the totalitarian and repressive society.

Portraying of the divergence between individual identity and collective goals of the state is the primary motif of dystopias. The government is projected as domineering, oppressive and all controlling. This is made possible by permeating into the complex web of life which helps to ensure complete discipline. The citizens in a dystopian state is under constant surveillance. Even the most personal aspects of their life are surveilled, to the extent that sex and marriage are considered important only for procreation. Even the children are taught to be loyal to the state thus the utopian dream that promised the commonwealth of all, ends up using its absolute powers in a dystopian world to exploit the body and mind of its people. This is made possible through the use of advanced technology, thus leading to extreme manipulation.

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