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HELPLESS AND HOPELESS SOCIETY: A PROMINENT TRAIT OF DYSTOPIAN NOVELS IN
THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The current paper tries to analyse the prominent trait of the dystopian societies reflected in the works of the novelists of the 20th century, especially Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Ayn Rand. There are many common traits of the dystopian societies as reflected among the works of the dystopian writers but their dissatisfaction about the society, which is on the threshold of dark future is apparent in their depiction of the depressing society with important traits of the helplessness and hopelessness among the characters, even the protagonists who had actually tried to change it to the betterment. The focus is on the political scenario, industrialization, mass production and negative use of science and technology.

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A dystopia, a community or society gone wrong, is the opposite of a utopia. Dystopias are often portrayed as social structures that have collapsed under an environment burden or political regime. Due to their very nature they are often set at some indefinite point in the future; societies do not decay over years but over decades. (Quoted by Mann: 477)

It can be argued that much Science Fiction takes place in either utopia or dystopia; they are the obvious choices for science fiction as they instantly communicate an alternate situation or environment. Dystopias particularly give the characters the reasons to act, as there is a very definite need to create a better society. The first known use of the term 'dystopia' appeared in a speech before the British Parliament by Grey Webber and John Stuart Mill in 1868. In that speech, Mill said,

"It is perhaps, too contemporary to call them utopias, they ought rather to be called dystopias or caco-topias. What is commonly called utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable." (quoted by Mann:477)

His knowledge of Greek suggests that he was referring to a bad place, rather than simply the opposite of Utopia. The Greek prefix "dys" signifies "ill" or "bad" or "abnormal"; Greek "topos" meaning place; and Greek "ou" meaning "not". From the common traits that the dystopian novels have, it can be derived that: Dystopia is a selectively told back story of a war, revolution, uprising, spike in over population, natural disaster or some other climatic event which resulted in the dramatic changes to the society.

SOME COMMON TRAITS OF A DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY

In general, dystopias are seen as visions of dangerous and alienating future societies. It is a culture where the condition of life is “extremely bad” as from deprivation, oppression or terror. The overwhelming majority of dystopias have some connection to the world, but often in an imagined future or an alternative history. Furthermore, the dystopia was brought about by human action or inaction whether stemming from human evil or merely stupidity. The only trait common to all dystopias is that they are negative and undesirable societies, but many commonalities are found across the dystopian societies. Many dystopias can be described as a utopian society with at least one fatal flaw. A utopian society is founded on perfectionism and fulfilment; a dystopian society’s dreams of improvement are overshadowed by stimulating fears of the “ugly –consequences of present day behaviour”.

SOCIETY

A dystopian society exhibits an apparent society free from poverty, disease, conflict and even unhappiness. Scratching the surface of the society, however, reveals exactly the opposite. The exact problem is, the way the problems are suppressed and its chronology forms the central conflict of the story. Many dystopias impose severe social restrictions on characters’ lives. This can take the form of social stratification where social class is strictly defined and enforced. Social mobility is non-existent. These social classes have reference to the classified societies during the industrial revolution. The rich became richer day by day and the poor became poorer day by day. The happy face of society during the revolution was that of the middle class of industrialists and businessmen that triumphed over the landed class of nobility and gentry. For example, in the novel *Brave New World* (1932), the caste or class system is prenatally designated, in terms of Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons, who lack the very ability to advance. Another often related form of restriction lies in the requirement of strict conformity among citizens, with a general assumption that dissent and individuality are bad. In the novel *We* (1920-21) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, people are permitted to live out of public view only for an hour a day. They are not only referred to by numbers instead of names, but are considered neither “citizens” nor “people” but “numbers”. The dystopian society depicted in *We* is called the One State, a glass city led by the Benefactor and surrounded by a giant Green Wall to separate citizens from nature. All citizens are known as “cypher” which means “non-entity”. In *Anthem*, Ayn Rand depicts the same type of society. Here also the characters are not known by their names but by the attributes and numbers that they are given.

Some dystopian works emphasize the pressure to conform in terms of the requirement not to excel. In these works, the society is ruthlessly egalitarian, in which ability and accomplishment or even competence, are suppressed and stigmatized as forms of inequality. As in *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, the protagonist Equality 7–2521 invents electricity and presents his invention in front of The Council of Scholars, efforts are made to capture him, because the characters in the novel are not allowed to deviate from their streamlined routine. In a typical dystopia, there is a total absence of any social group beside the state; such social groups become the subdivisions of the state, under the government control, for example, the junior anti-sex league in *1984* by George Orwell.

Among social groups, independent religions are notable by their absence. In *Brave New World*, the establishment of the state including chopping off the tops of all crosses (as symbols of Christianity) to make them “T”s (as symbols of Henry Ford’s model “T”). In 1910, the model “T” was the first automobile mass produced on assembly lines with completely interchangeable parts, marketed to the middle class. In 1914, the assembly process for the Model “T” had been so streamlined that it took only 93 minutes to assemble a car. That year Ford produced more cars than all other automakers combined. The Model “T” was a great commercial success, and by the time Henry made his 10 millionth car, 9 out of 10 of all cars in the entire world were Ford’s. Henry employed vertical integration of the industries needed to create his cars. He specified how to make the wood crates that outside suppliers used to ship him parts. Then he disassembled the crates and used the wood–pieces in

the bodies of his “Kingsford”, still a leading brand of charcoal.

The state may stage, a personality cult, with quasi-religious rituals about a central figure, usually a head of state or an oligarchy of some sort, such as Big Brother in *1984* (1949) or the Well-doer in *We* (1920-21). In explicitly theocratic dystopias, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the religion is the state, and is enforced with the same vigour as any secular dystopia's rule; it does not provide social bonds outside the state. Even more than

religion, family is attacked by dystopian societies. In some societies, it has been completely eradicated, but clearly at great effort, and continuing efforts are deployed to keep it down, as in *Brave New World* (1932), where children are produced artificially, where the concept of a 'mother' or 'father' is obscene. In others, the institution of the family exists but great efforts are deployed to keep it in service of the state as in *1984* (1949), where children are organized to spy on their parents. The dystopia often must contain human sexuality in order to prevent its disrupting society. The disruption of ten springs from the social bonds that sexual activity formats rather than sexual activity itself, like when Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1937), features a hero and heroine whose revolt stems from a wish to form a human connection and express their personal love. Therefore, some dystopias are depicted as containing it by encouraging promiscuous sexuality and lack of ideals of romantic love, so that the characters do not impute importance to the activity. In *Brave New World*, Lenina Crowne confesses to having sexual intercourse with only one man and is encouraged by her friend to be more promiscuous. Alternatively, anti-sexualism is also prevalent as a way of social control, the junior anti-sex league in *1984*, in which the state controls the lives of its citizens so heavily that sexual activity is often an act of rebellion. The society frequently isolates the characters from all contacts with the natural world. Dystopias are commonly urban, and they generally avoid nature. The individuals are regarded as dangerously anti-social in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is a novel by Ray Bradbury. The main impetus of the book is that literature is an important and almost sacred part of the civilization. Here the protagonist is not a proud public servant who puts out fire but an employee of a fascist regime who burns books. The USA – in this dystopian setting – has outlawed all reading and literature to replace it by the operator's own history. *Fahrenheit 451*, represents a future in which all books are banned, individuals are anti-social and hedonistic, and critical thought is suppressed. Guy Montag, the central character is employed as a fire man (i.e. book-burner). The number "451" refers to the temperature at which a book or paper burns (as in the book). Beatty says that all firemen are bound to steal a book at one time or another and burn it within 24 hours. Montag argues with his wife over the book, showing his growing disgust for her and for his society.

Extending the view that the society in the dystopian works seems apparently happy and prosperous, but if the surface happiness is removed, the real image of the slave society creates a disturbing environment.

In *1984*, although Oceania is constantly at war, with Eastasia and Eurasia, there seemed a stability as the prices remain stable, as they are controlled by the Big Brother and his inner party. London is occasionally bombarded but people seem to get accustomed to it. On one hand, there is a scientific development shown by the use of telescreens, electric machines which are used to shock the traitor, use of scientific weapons, use of bombs, helicopters and parachutes, but on the other hand, social crisis is projected through loss of individuality and belongingness, lack of loyalty, the sense of distrust, constant fear and emotionless world. The scientifically developed world is provided to very few of the members of the inner party. Class inequality is shown through different quality of the same thing to be provided to the mass and to the members of the inner party. The mass is constantly deprived of many of the daily needs as against that the government reduces the price of chocolates. Food stuffs and other daily requirements are either very expensive or are not available at all. But the developments by the government are so much propagated by them that they overshadow the weaknesses of the government and society.

In *Brave New World* (1932), in the first two chapters, the narrator describes to the students the scientific progress through which the decantation takes place. The Bokanovsky's procedure is a horrific picture of, alcohol, x-rays, budding into ninety-six identical human embryos. *Brave New World* is a world of sophistication, industrial development, scientific progress and constant development. There is an ample use of helicopters, chemicals, scents and drinks, use of contraceptive pills, use of soma. The world is praised by all as

it is based on stability. The world based on stability has to lose so many things such as democracy, literature, nature, love, family, relations. But the constant importance is given to the world based on mass production. This highly sophisticated world is contrasted by another world within the novel. That world of reservation is a world untouched by all the technological and scientific progress, therefore that world is being looked down upon by others. The Director, the controller know very well what they had to lose to achieve this standard of life but they do not reveal anything to the mass and constantly condition them to believe in stability which they have achieved.

The world in *Anthem* (1937) goes to another extreme to show the adverse effect of industrial revolution and scientific progress. Here the government deliberately keeps the citizens away from the 'unmentionable times' - the age of enlightenment. The government projects it very negatively. In the world of *Anthem*, candle is the latest invention which is found only hundred years ago, they also found glass to protect their houses from rain. These were the latest developments but actually they were not the modern inventions. The government has banned the individuality and freedom as it wants to maintain its power for a longer period of time. Instead of accepting the benefits given by science, they ban them completely. They worship collectivism, because if they think individually, they would come up with new ideas which would put the government into trouble. Thus, government in all the three novels constantly propagate only those ideals and development that would help them to dominate the world smoothly. Dystopian fiction is the natural correlative of utopian mode of literature and presents visions of literature and presents visions of literature and presents visions of imaginary worlds in which the worst of all possible social conditions pertain and where all ethical, aesthetic and metaphysical judgments are consequently problematized.

The development from utopian harmony to dystopian dissonance is a crucial one, as it provides with a context not only within which to place the production of *1984*, but also within which to read it. The science fiction and dystopian novels presented visions of the horrors that await mankind. This is one major form of crisis of faith under which western culture reels. The suspension of ethical and moral sensibility which was necessary to countenance the continuation of the war prompted serious philosophical questions about the limits to which human behaviour could be stretched. The memory of the war and the devastation that it had entailed rendered visions of future perfection in substantial, if not entirely untenable. The pre-eminence of the machine and its destructive capabilities were brought firmly into focus by the war and suggested a potential nightmare future in which the human individual is subordinate to an efficient and emotionless machine culture. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) was a magnified projection into the future of a present that contained Stalinism and an immediate past that had witnessed the flowering of Nazism. *Brave New World* (1932) was written before the rise of Hitler to Supreme power in Germany and the Russian tyrant had not yet got into his stride. In 1931, systematic terrorism was not the obsessive contemporary fact which it had become in 1948, and the future dictatorship of an imaginary world was a good deal, less brutal than the future dictatorship.

Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World* (1932) presents dystopian visions where ultimate goal of industrial civilization's will lead to. It would lead to the achievement of universal happiness that keeps the wheels of mass production turning but it will destroy humanity. The

civilization of *Brave New World* has chosen machinery and medicine for happiness. Huxley's preoccupations with Utopias belong to a wider movement, as many writers in the earlier twentieth century were turning away from the facilely benign utopias of the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. The concept of Utopia, implicitly rejected in *Crome Yellow* (1921), haunted Huxley as he watched the advance of the applied sciences and particularly of physiology and psychology. He realized that utopia was not an entirely an impossible abstraction but it cannot be made with men as they are. The state in Huxley's novel *Brave New World* (1932) provides its citizens with happiness and stability, with protection, amusement, purpose and pleasure in return to their submission to the controller. In the pursuit of happiness, certain metaphysical variables have been lost, truth and beauty have become taboo, art has been abolished, belief in God outlawed. The individual has the ability to choose a form of happiness - induced narcosis but must, in return, forsake those things which define what it means to be human. Although the novel is set in the future, it contains contemporary issues of the early 20th century.

The Industrial Revolution was bringing about massive changes to the world. Mass production had made cars, telephones and radios relatively cheap and widely available throughout the developed world, Huxley was able to use the setting and characters from his futuristic fantasy to express widely held opinions, particularly the fear of losing individual identity and fast advancing world of the future. If *1984* mirrors Stalinism, *Brave New World* mirrors mass production and industrialism, *Anthem* by Ayn Rand has altogether radical point of view. She was of opinion that if collectivism engulfs the whole world, the society will be regressive. All the developments, innovations and progress would be away from the reach of man and the common man will be living in almost a primitive stage. She firmly believed that man's essential characteristic is his rational faculty. Man's mind is his basic means of survival - his only means of gaining knowledge.

In "The Objective Ethics", in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, she mentions,

"Man cannot survive, as animals do, by the guidance of mere precepts' He cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought. He needs a process of thought to discover how to plant and grow his food or how to make weapons for hunting his life depends on such knowledge and only a volitional act of his consciousness, a process of thought, can provide it."
(Rand:14)

Since men are neither omniscient nor infallible, they must be free to agree or disagree, to co-operate or to pursue their own independent course, each according to his own rational judgement. Freedom is the fundamental requirement of man's mind. She mentioned the theme of *Anthem* as the meaning and glory of man's ego. Ayn Rand wrote *Anthem* while she was working on the plot of *The Fountainhead* (1943). Ayn Rand's suffering in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution and her facing the dictatorship made her a proponent of individualism.

In most of the dystopian works, the society is bereft of individual existence. People exist as a part of system, not as a part of a family. They don't have any specific relation with one another. There is only one relation that is of the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, the dystopian society alienates one from one's own identity.

The institutions and rulers of *1984* are monstrously and appallingly enlarged. The whole world is dominated by three super -powers, Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. In *1984*, Orwell takes the ideas and images with which the utopian imagination had worked in the past and turns them upside down. He makes the language of utopia his own and rewrites it in terms of parody. Orwell systematically turns the inside out of the utopian literature, in this way, the anti -utopia explodes the whole genre of utopia. The typical utopian city, well-ordered, harmonious and perfect in all parts, the very layout of which reflects the sophisticated ideals of the utopian writer is represented by a decaying, bomb shocked London of ruins and skull-like houses denuded of windows. In the standard utopia, there ruled a harmonious relationship between both man and his environment and man and the state. The constant watchful regard in Oceania does not unite its people, but rather isolates and separates them.

As O'Brien in *1984* says,

'it is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic, utopias that the old reformers imagined', (P.No. 267, 1984).

It is thus in no way a utopia founded on love. In the words of O'Brien in *1984*, the society depicted in *1984* is,

A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon The old civilization claimed that they were founded on love and justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world, there will be no emotions except, fear, rage, triumph and self abasement. (Orwell: 267).

The total transparency of the standard utopian place which hides nothing of its workings and leaves no shadow of doubt or uncertainty of its motives and functions under the all pervading light of rationality, honesty and truth becomes in Oceania a total invisibility. In Oceania, mirrors do not reflect as the glass is opaque. The world of Airstrip one, itself, is the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania. In its physical and social trappings, it is the world of war –weary England in the last stages of the Second World War. It is a drab world so is the residence of Winston Smith, it is in the dilapidated block of flats, victory hallway smelling

of 'boiled cabbage and old rag mats'. There are lifts that often don't work because of erratic power failures, the coarse soap, the shortages of razor blades, button and shoelaces, as well as of modest luxuries such as sweets and chocolates. The proles shops are the places from where these things can be illicitly obtained. The artificial or adulterated tea, coffee and sugar; the ill-fitting clothes and unhealthy faces of the people fill up the distressed atmosphere. Intermittently, rocket bombs hit the city, but the people have become too used to this to bother to seek refuge in the tube stations. Bombsites and craters litter the city. Here the lack of technological sophistication is deliberate.

Against this coarse totalitarian society of 1984, there is a highly sophisticated world of *Brave New World* but this sophistication is apparent, the actual world beneath it is an oppressed world. Aldous Huxley, while differentiating his novel, *Brave New World* (1932) from the novels by other authors, suggested that

“the theme of the novel is not the advancement of science as such; it is an advancement of science as it affects human individual.” (Huxley:32, Foreword. *Brave New World*).

This is a problem which had been growingly acute since the great avalanche of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and which after the First World War and the soviet revolution had assumed even more oppressive political and economical forms. The world of A.F. 632 is simply the thorough going realization of the ideal of the complete man, a never ending round of good-times. Like the complete man's world, this world is basically materialistic and sensual. The result of this intensification of 'happiness' is that there exists almost no possibility for the completer man to discard his beard, listen to Mozart instead of the sixteen saxophonists or choose to enter a 'crystal world' instead of an orgy-porgian solidarity service. In the name of a totally external happiness, any kind of significant internal life has been banished from the Fordian World. This kind of progress is really no progress at all. Real progress, in Huxley's terms, can be defined as 'personal progress' or 'internal progress'. It is only through this type of advancement that one can hope to create a 'genuinely human society'. In creating a culture where human growth is deliberately stunted in the embryo in order that 'ninety-six identical twins' can work as ninety-six identical machines, the science of *Brave New World* (1932) has merely responded to the problem called 'mass production' by Ford. Babies who come out of test-tubes naturally do so in exactly the same numbers, size and type required to keep the society stable. Huxley's picture of a world appears at first sight to be the success story of all time. But it is only on reflection that one realizes that the problems of human society have been solved in *Brave New World* (1932). People are not only prevented from breeding themselves into subhuman misery but are also refused any opportunity to plan their own lives, educate their own children, possess or transmit their own property, change their roles, ranks or employment in society. Physical and mental happiness have disappeared, so too have art, religion, freedom, philosophy and poetry. 'Anything for a quiet life' is the basic and consciously formulated slogan of this society in which the idea of 'repressive tolerance' is put into practice with quite remarkable success. Any public expression of discontent is quietly put down by a police force which vaporizes the rioters with a euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinating drug called 'soma'. This reminds of 'Thought-police' and 'Thought-crime', in 1984, where if a person even thinks against the inner party or thinks even differently than the rules laid down by the Inner Party, 'Thought-police' catches hold of him and punishes him in the public place. In the new world, youth is not merely skin-deep. It penetrates far into the interior of the Fordian psyche, so far that the lower orders have no choice but to be young. Heredity and conditioning will not permit them to think or act otherwise than an infantile fashion. Only the Alphas, the managerial elite of the Fordian state, do not have to be infantile in their emotional behaviour. This, however, does not mean that they are freed from the obligation of maintaining a proper standard of infantile decorum through to be sure a few Alphas like Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson occasionally behave in incredulous adult ways. But their example can have no permanent effect, for the very simple reason that adults are removed at once from the society. The only adults who are permitted to influence the Fordian state are the twelve so-called world-controllers, who function as a tiny priest class governing a vast population of blissfully ignorant babies. In 1984 (1949), such superiority is enjoyed by the members of the inner party who have a better quality of consumable goods rather than supplied to the mass. Here, the rules are same for all the society except for the few ones. To judge by the example of Mustapha Mond, however, the world controllers are a very sober and benevolent group who selflessly devote

themselves to the welfare of their charges. It is on his shoulders, and on those of his eleven peers that the ultimate responsibility of the operation of the Fordian state rests. The society is governed on the ideals of

'COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY (Huxley : 6).

The same echo is received through the slogans of *1984* (1949),

WAR IS PEACE,

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (Orwell : 27).

Anthem (1937) also has the Great Truth that

'All men are one and that there is no will save the will of all men together' (Rand : 20).

While *1984* (1949), and *Brave New World* (1932) have the reference to the technological sophistication, *Anthem* (1937) has passed that technological era long back in past. It is now a regressive society. Mankind has entered another dark age as a result of what Ayn Rand saw as the evils of irrationality and collectivism and the weaknesses of socialistic thinking and economics. The concept of individuality has been eliminated as in *1984* and *Brave New World*. As in common with her works, Rand draws a clear distinction between the socialists or communal values of equality and brotherhood, and the productive or capitalists values of achievement and individuality. The society in *Anthem* (1937) is the image of the ideals held by the collectivist society. Here society is supreme and all the individuals must bow down and obey the rules of the society. It believes that an individual exists only to serve the society and has no right to free life pursuit of happiness. It values a blind unquestioning alliance - a willingness to follow orders without thinking at all. The World Councils are in no danger from the mindless brutes of a society, the councils fear only one enemy: The freethinking mind. The society has no caste-system or religion. It is made of the Home of the infants, Home of the students, Council of vocations, Council of scholars. These councils decide the vocation and occupation of the individual. The World Council is a global government that rules the entire world. In this world of the dark future, the individuals possess no rights. The expression of first person singular has become the 'unspeakable world'. 'Unmentionable Times' are the days of the past when mankind still possessed individual rights and political freedom. The dictators regard those past days as evil, because humans were living for themselves, not for others. It is unlawful to speak of those days when individuals were free to pursue their own happiness. The Great Truth, which they believe, is that human beings are not individuals but mere fragments of the whole. This society has been indoctrinated with the view that the human race is like an ant-colony in which each person is not a single separate whole but an appendage of a larger social unity. The individuals have to follow those rules and regulations which are laid down by the authority. If they go against it, it is called the transgression of Preference. It is a sin of choice, which occurs when a person favours an activity or person based on independent judgement. Any exercise of independent evaluation is banned by this society. The individual will be first sent to the Palace of Corrective Detention. If an individual makes any effort for finding out his identity, he will be burnt alive in the square of the city witnessed by all. This reminds of the 'Thought-police', 'Thought-crime' of *1984* (1949) and 'Reservation' in *Brave New World* (1932). All the three novels have one more thing in common is the song to uphold the collectivism. In *1984*, there is a two-minute hate sessions where they appreciate the works and dominance of Big Brother and punish the traitor who goes to find out the truth of the inner society. In *Brave New World* (1932), there is an orgy-porgy song as the hymn in honour of His Fordship, that is sung with music, band and always in group. It almost becomes prayer. In *Anthem* (1937), every evening the bells ring for social meeting where they sing hymns of Brotherhood, hymns of Equality and hymn of collective spirit. Thus, they all are constantly moulded to accept collectivism as the only ideal state to govern the world. Thus, all the three novels taken up for comparative study has collective and universal government in common, working on the same ideology to banish individualism in society to protect their supremacy over the mass. They are ready to take anything for the maintenance and sustenance of their power. The authors of all the dystopian novels are not happy with industrialization, especially mass production that decays society day by day, from within, but the irony is the society seems apparently happy.

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