



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**DYSTOPIAN IMAGINATION: A COMPARATIVE CRITIQUE
OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *BRAVE
NEW WORLD***

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to analyse dystopian imagination in two twentieth century novels, projecting two different worlds that may become a reality in distant future if certain negative aspects of society are exploited beyond limit. Though dystopian fiction takes place in the future yet it discusses the present social conditions. It often purposely incorporates the contemporary social trends that are exaggerated to a point of warning to make clear their most negative qualities. Dystopian mode is therefore deeply rooted in contemporary issues, fears and aspirations. It cannot be dismissed merely as fanciful imagination rather it rightly forewarns society of the impending disasters if certain negative aspects of society are not nipped in time.

Atwood presents dystopian vision to forewarn her readers about the consequences of religious conservatism, which may result in depriving women of their rights and freedom whereas Huxley's future vision depicts the end of the traditional and normal way of life and emergence of everything that is new and strange in the modern world. He forewarns the consequences of excessive materialism, technological inventions, disregard of moral values, religion and spirituality and pleasure maniac society.

Key words: dystopian imagination, religious fanaticism, totalitarian, materialism, scientific advancement

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Human mind has always tried to overcome the gap between the dream world and the real world through imagination. Imagination gives form to our unrealized dreams and desires. This imaginative thinking has been used to create the images of perfect dream world as against the real world, while exaggerating some aspects of the real world in literature of all ages. Anais Nin rightly states:

The dream ... instead of being something apart from reality, a private world of fantasy or imagination, is actually an essential part of our reality...(23)

Dreams thus are a projection of the world that is perceived through the senses. Literature too is an imitation of the perceived world but with a dash of creative imagination. Dystopian imagination is one such

mode of writing where the real world is juxtaposed with the imaginative world that is governed by certain prevailing tastes. The twentieth century saw an amalgamation of various political doctrines such as Communism, Capitalism, Democracy etc., changing pattern of women's position in society and dominance of science and scientific research which caused emergence of 'dystopian fiction', a new type of imaginative writing that was a blend of modernism and social realism in one form. It reflected the currents and forces that were shaping and moulding contemporary society. The term 'dystopia' emerged as a reaction against unattainability of utopian dream. Dystopia, thus is an antonym of 'utopia'; "good place" or a satire of utopian imagination and it literally means "bad place". The first recorded use of the term 'dystopia' was made by John Stuart Mill in a parliamentary speech and the credit of its recent popularity goes to Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick, who used this term in their book *Quest for Utopia* (1952).

Dystopian fiction projects the contemporary social trends into imaginative reality, while pulling them to extremes in order to prophesy the drastic consequences of stretching anything beyond its limits. Dystopian fiction presents a kind of social criticism as its main focus is the contemporary trends in the society and presents a vision of an alternate reality.

Although dystopian fiction lacks basic fundamentals of traditional novel writing such as characterization, psychological realism and suspense but it keeps intriguing the readers with the deft handling of setting in distant future to present a vision of distorted tomorrow that sprouts from the seeds sown in the present itself. The seething interest of anti-utopian fiction lies in the fact that it projects a certain weakness or inefficiency in the society or system it depicts causing a conflict with the rebellious protagonist. Thus the dystopian fiction often revolves around dramatic conflict between society which is very often a totalitarian society and a protagonist, who is a non-conformist.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the seething tension is between theocratic totalitarian state, Gilead and the female protagonist Offred who does not believe in religious propaganda of the theocratic Gilead. The conflict here is internal one as she manipulates the circumstances of getting out of this so-called 'perfect society' in her mind all the time. On the other hand the conflict in *Brave New World* is both internal and external. It becomes internal when the protagonist John or the Savage feels distressed with the World State and its spiritual vacuity. The conflict becomes external in John's questioning of Mustapha Mond's 'utopia' and his rejection of this supposedly 'happy society'.

The conflict in the dystopian novel arises from the central idea of the novel, an idea that becomes a commanding passion and moves the plot ahead. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* revolves around the revival of religious fanaticism and how this conservative totalitarian theocracy has made its citizens more or less captives. Thus the novel becomes the study of survival. Similarly Huxley builds the plot of *Brave New World* on the idea of staying human in the high-tech and materialistic society. Huxley's vision moves on the premise whether the satisfaction of material wants and mindless pleasures would overpower the desire for freedom.

The dystopian fiction often discusses ideas of its author and to save it from monotony and boredom, the novelist amuses his readers by the ingenious management of setting and detail. As the dystopian societies are often set in future, the novelist makes readers identify the trends that would lead to dystopian vision. Atwood and Huxley in their respective visions strain our senses of the probable, but they do not uproot us from the real world. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Brave New World* depict totalitarian states as extensions of the trends and patterns of contemporary real world.

Since these two novels are dystopias, they share some common traits of dystopian fiction. Both novels depict totalitarian societies. The worlds of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Brave New World* are governed by totalitarian party or group which strictly monitors most aspects of the lives of their citizens. This imposing form of totalitarian government is heavily present throughout both novels that sacrifice individual rights in favour of the interests of the ruling group. Gilead takes it even further, denying the integrity not only of the individual person, but also of the human body. Women in Gilead are important only as potential mothers.

In *Brave New World*, the totalitarian government treats its citizens as possessions but in a different sense. Reproduction has been technically controlled to suit the interests of the society. The predestinators estimate the need for various members of each caste, and the 'Hatchery' mass produces human beings to satisfy the needs of market. Both societies treat its citizens like 'things' that can perform tasks imposed by these governments.

Like most of the totalitarian governments, these societies too use propaganda to transform people's beliefs from repulsion to normalcy. The theocracy of *The Handmaid's Tale* uses religious propaganda to placate its citizens and to assure that whatever the government is doing is in keeping with the wish of God. On the other hand in *Brave New World*, government makes its citizens believe that the society is normal, but here people are conditioned to believe that from birth. The citizens of the World State are programmed to enjoy their destiny and contribute to social stability by means of 'Hypnopaedia' or behavior determinism. Rigid class-structure is a basic feature of dystopian fiction. Huxley and Atwood too depict societies where division between the upper, middle and lower classes is definitive and unbending. The theocratic Gilead has divided men and women in different castes. Likewise the inhabitants of the World State are rigidly divided into five classes or castes. Alphas and their subordinates, Betas, control society. Below them in descending order of intelligence and physique are Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons.

Both societies restrict freedom of speech. Gilead does not allow its citizens to communicate and know anything. The World Controllers of *Brave New World* though allow free communication yet they have perverted the language to the extent that the words have lost their meaning.

The Handmaid's Tale and *Brave New World* present two extreme positions of religion and 'progress' of science respectively. Atwood depicts in *The Handmaid's Tale* theocratic Gilead and its main motto is to establish orthodox Christianity. On the other hand the World State of *Brave New World* is a high tech society completely controlled by technological inventions and its major concern is to provide social stability at any cost. What Atwood fears is the ascendancy of religious conservatism and totalitarian theocracy that may deprive its citizens of all their rights and keep them ignorant. Huxley fears the emergence of a mechanical and materialistic society where humanity will be reduced to passivity because of excessive pleasure and no one will be concerned with knowing anything. Atwood fears the future where books and magazines will be banned and Huxley asserts that there will be no reason to ban books, as no one will be interested in reading books. There will be no place for truth as mankind will be preoccupied with trivial pleasures and sexual promiscuity and it will be a 'trivial culture'.

Atwood predicts a future where religion will be used to enslave people and Huxley asserts that man's own inventions will enslave him and God and religion will be mere things of the past. Atwood depicts that we may be ruined by what we repel and Huxley shows that we will be ruined by what we love.

Dystopian fiction does not depict what is going to happen but what we fear will happen, fears that are not always expressed clearly. It forewarns and makes us think fearfully about certain things in our own times. It forewarns and makes mankind to think and rationalize its own doings in the present otherwise there will be no future to think about.

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