Women trapped in dystopian societies in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract: It was never easy to be a woman in a society of any ethnicity or demography, but it can get worse for them if dystopia arrives in the so-called progressive world of the twenty-first century. This paper tries to explore this dark side of the world which can come true if the political and social powers go anarchic in the ruling governments of a nation. An analysis of female oppression due to gender politics in dystopian societies in the works of the contemporary feminist dystopian genre. A study to understand if women are already fighting for their basic rights of gender equality and safety and how nightmarish things can get for them in such dystopian societies. What roles will be assigned and defined for women in dystopian societies to politically repress them. I have tried to look at and understand this question through two contemporary novels, Leila by Prayag Akbar and Before she sleeps by Bina Shah. How feminist dystopian literature captures the rage and anxiety of women. Dystopias often stem from current issues. They take elements from the present and distort them in every possible way. What fascinates me, however, is how most dystopian narratives seem to revolve around women in one of both ways: either they are at the center of the abuse, or they are leading the rebels against it.

Keywords: dystopia, contemporary fiction, misogyny, feminism, oppression, gender inequality

Introduction: The term "dystopia" refers to a hypothetical future civilization in which oppressive social control is maintained while giving the impression of a utopian society. Dystopias criticize contemporary norms, cultural standards, or political institutions by imagining their worst possible outcomes. Dystopian literature idea originated from various Utopian literature like “Utopia” by Thomas More, “News from Nowhere” by William Morris, “New Atlantis” by Francis Bacon, “Republic” by Plato and many others which talked about an idealized world. As Utopia talked about the idealized world and gave birth to many such pathbreaking and phenomenal works creating a new genre, it also pushed creative minds to imagine a society that could be opposite to that, and a new term was coined, “Dystopia”. This genre got popularized by many great works in the twentieth century and post that, like, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s “WE”, Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World”, George Orwell’s “1984”, Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451” and many others. And then, in the late twentieth century, a sub-genre of the Dystopian genre called feminist dystopia came into existence and pushed the envelope of hypothetical fiction even more. Margaret Atwood’s “A handmaid’s Tale” was the most remarkable and popular work of this genre, setting the landscape, narrative and tone of it. Margaret Atwood’s “Hand Maid’s Tale” is considered a feminist dystopian classic. There’s also a television adaptation of it on Hulu Originals.

Leila by Prayag Akbar, the first of the two works of modern literature I'll be reading for my paper, is set in a dystopian future in which people live in communities referred to as sectors. The purity of the residents is the foundation of the community as a whole. Those who wed outside of their caste or group are transported to camps where they are forced to conform. The other book is Before she sleeps by Bina shah, which is set in a fictional place in South West Asia, and survives a global nuclear fallout 70 years from now. Because a deadly virus has killed the majority of women in the City, the authorities parcel off the remaining women to husbands chosen by the ‘Perpetuation Bureau’. Women are left with no choice but to embrace state-sanctioned polygamy, turning into birthing machines to “bring an entire nation back to life”.

In the book Leila, the protagonist Leila goes through various forms of oppression in a dystopian society due to a theocratic government, as she goes on a quest for her missing daughter amidst a world where religion and caste embody one’s real identity, persists throughout the novel. Shalini, who was born to a Hindu family, marries Riz, a Muslim and gives birth to Leila. She also witnesses a swift change in her community, with sector walls dividing people of different castes and the governing power in the hands of council members. Shalini gets separated from her daughter after an attack by religious fanatics and her husband killed by them. The attackers or the members of the theocratic society enslave Shalini in a “purity camp” where women who have rebelled against the irrational laws of the community are imprisoned and forced to accept their guilt. The sham purity camp fails to impair the purest motherly love in Shalini and her quest to find her daughter, for which she herself forcibly accepts the norm of the society. The humane in her this struggle to survive in a bigoted world. Marxist theory that originated in nineteenth-century England with the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels can appertain to Prayag Akbar’s Leila. Prejudice based on race, class and gender is universal and still prevails in the contemporary ultra-modern world. Marxist cultural theory empowers the readers to acknowledge and annihilate the subhuman and to revitalize the humane. Women who reside in the purity camps are the victims of a ruthless violation of human rights. Inter-caste and intermarriages have ended up with honor killings, where the women are forced to witness the death of their partners by certain ideologically leaning governments.

Bina Shah likewise describes a repressive, dystopian society in her book Before She Sleeps. This has come to light as one effect of a viral epidemic that was uncontrolled and caused a disproportionate number of males to females. In such a gendered society, intimacy is made into a commodity, giving women a tool of protest in a fertility-obsessed and patriarchal society. Shah investigates the horrible repercussion of epidemics, highlighting chances for people subjected to discriminatory laws to achieve freedom. The pandemic's effects, apart from mortality, are obvious as it wreaks havoc on human and economic life across the world. The epidemic
has made it difficult for society to react appropriately and morally because of the difficulties around employment, political culpability, and overburdened healthcare systems. The book is broken up into three chapters, each of which narrates the tale from a different perspective. The primary protagonist Sabine receives most of the first-person narrative, although other voices reappear to provide other viewpoints on the events. Authors of dystopian fiction frequently use the easy disguise of fictional settings and made-up events to express their unhappiness with the state of the world today. Bina Shah addresses authoritarianism and constant monitoring, which lead to the brutal persecution of women, in her dystopian book “Before She Sleeps (Shah 2018)”, expressing her personal frustration with Pakistanis politics and sexist beliefs. The Handmaid’s Tale (Atwood 1996) is often compared by reviewers (Kirkus 2018; Maguire 2018), and the book comments on the unfair restrictions that modern women endure, much as Margaret Atwood did in the year 1985. Despite this, Shah's writing is more relatable and intersectional than Atwood’s. Many works of dystopian literature use the motif of a terrible, infectious disease decimating a whole nation. Many writers have used plagues, fatal diseases, and the aftermath of nuclear bombs as the setting for their investigations of post-apocalyptic civilizations that are suffering. Overpopulation or population implosion are two types of demographic upheaval that are often explored in dystopian literature (Domingo 2008, 732). Both of these fears—of losing one's individuality amid a sea of people or of mass fatalities—are expressed by these characteristics. Our current situation is reminiscent of such a terrible and bleak atmosphere. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented level of precarity for many individuals who have been affected by the loss of a loved one, illness, significant job losses, or uncertain futures. Margaret McCartney, in an article on reading fiction during the pandemic, notes that dystopian novels use ambiguity in their depictions of sickness, much as it is found in real life (McCarty 2020, 526). Recent dystopian fiction dramatizes the bewildering cacophony of false information and pervasive worry that characterizes today and has led to widespread unease and mistrust of governments around the globe. Shah's text, which was as well as published before COVID-19, seems to predict the present epidemic. Because of the enormous gender imbalance brought forth by Shah's imagined "Virus," the women in Shah's novel resist. Women are exposed to harsh, constrictive patriarchal control in a gloomy, dark environment. In the pretext of revitalizing society or maintaining their own totalitarian control, authoritarian governments enact unfair laws that oppress women, muting half the population. The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood has recently gained even more recognition as an example of a feminist dystopian fiction because of its television adaptation. In fact, pressure organizations have used The Handmaid’s Tale and its Netflix adaptation as a tool for a backlash against sexism. When the far-right administration of Donald Trump was in power from 2016 to 2020, female activists in the United States and throughout the globe resorted to donning the crimson cloaks and white bonnets of the novel's characters in their demonstrations. A foundation is provided by The Handmaid's Tale for feminist dystopian authors to expand upon as they explore or critique the laws requiring controlled reproduction that treat women as commodities in capitalist trade systems. These exploitative institutions put the ability of women to procreate at the center of the economy. Shah's disease-ridden fictional universe has gender inequity. Despite its grandeur and sparkling skylines, gender dynamics in Green City are relevant to every modern nation-state. After a nuclear winter that blanketed the area 50 years ago, Shah's imagined nation is war-weakened. The human papillomavirus caused a new kind of cervical cancer that wiped out the female population after the atomic bombing. Shah imagines that the mutation has killed off most women while sparing males from harm. To correct the dangerously unbalanced gender ratio in Green City, polyandric unions are required. The government has passed laws that give one lady many "Husbands" in order to increase the population count. These "Wives" are given hormones and pressured to have as many children as possible, alluding to the pronatalist practices of the Ceausescu regime, the Nazi Lebensborn program, and the brutal enforcement of China's one-child policy. Men in Green City protect women as though they were the ones enduring difficulties to do so: “They had been noble enough to make the sacrifice of sharing wives” (Shah 2018, 167). While they oversee and implement damaging reproductive policies, they smile at the horrific maltreatment of women. Monogamy and sex jealousy are suppressed by the polyandry system. It eventually supports men’s aggressive, humiliating behavior by replacing personal human ties with clinical militia-pair houses. Reuben Faro, the rich and influential guy Lin is close to and depends upon, is used as an illustration of this. He is portrayed as possessing some degree of humanity: “Faro was no monster; he was a man trapped in a life that promised him absolute power but in return had stripped him of everything good and honorable” (234). Reuben is a prime example of how Green City's system harms both men and women since he has given in his sensitive side for a life of wealth and power. In general, dystopian authority tightly regulates environments and uses psychophysical and linguistic submission to manipulate or repress people, forcing them to adhere to their ethical, political, and social standards while blaming, repressing, and excluding the outcasts and those who are not in alignment. People, therefore, turn into "lands" that may be attacked and overun. By restricting space, power demonstrates its majesty, governs its people, and recognizes the non-aligned, transforming settings into (both literal and metaphorical) extensions of power. Power propagates just the essential ideas and messages through controlling language, which finally leads to the eradication of unwelcome conceptions. Power limits bodies to create ideal citizens who are submissive and docile, and it presents "otherness" as a dangerous element of societal norms, justifying the marginalization or eradication of "others" who are racial, ideological, or sexual. When it comes to women, the patriarchal objectification and under-mirroring of the feminine gender are also facilitated by the control of space, assault, and linguistic squalor. Where dystopias exist in fiction (as well as in realities that show dystopian tendencies), “women can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through a male/sexist oppression” (Di Minico 2017, p. 71). What roles do sexuality, violence, and space play in influencing women and supporting dystopia? What role do women play when "bad places" are described? How are the narratives of women portrayed in patriarchal systems? Feminist theories assert that from the start of time, “the androcentric character of patriarchy inherently [has confined] women to the fringes of society” (Gilarak 2012, p. 221). This "ideology of male supremacy" may have its roots in the archetypal tendency to value the submission and reproductive control of women as a means of validating masculine conceptions of superiority. This cult's dependence on patriarchal authority and conventional norms is undermined by women's independence and empowerment, which
fosters male sexism and hostility against women in hostile environments. “Fear generates violence and desire for destruction because destruction is the most reassuring form of possession” (Battaglia 1998, p. 182).

It's noteworthy to note that throughout society, particularly in conservative, patriarchal, and/or fascist situations, there is a "self-evident" link "between political power and the male gender role" (Patai 1984, p. 258). The community engages in gender-based violence experiments to a greater extent the more rigid the gender norms are, and the more the authorities react to them (Reid-Cunningham 2008, p. 283). The horrifying dystopian realms serve as a warning that the outcomes might be disastrous: “male egos and female bodies; male persons and female animals: these are the extremes of which an ideology of male supremacy is capable” (Patai 1984, p. 258).

“We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. We lived in the gaps between the stories” (Atwood 1986, p. 57), offered remarks, alluding to the early dismissal of the precursors to the tyranny. Furthermore, this remark highlights the fact that in patriarchal and repressive societies, where women are objects rather than protagonists, women's spaces, language, bodies, and aspirations are devalued. This relationship between space and power has been extensively interiorized in fiction, which demonstrates how socio-politically and geographically formed realities differ from dystopian fantasies. Feminist dystopias sometimes demand the construction of cities specifically created for males, with women forcibly restricted to domestic spaces or ghettos, in order to emphasize the inequalities between men and women. In these circumstances, toxic masculinity and masculine spaces may almost physically crush women's bodies, rendering them both physically and cognitively invisible.

But one point still needs to be argued. Dystopia will be nightmarish is more or less agreed by everyone, but many theorists believe it's just an exaggerated reality; there are no facts and figures to feel this so-called lurking danger. The sociological imagination, a theory created by C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), offers a framework for comprehending our social reality that goes way beyond any common sense understanding we may gain from our limited social experiences; supporting this argument. Modern sociologist Mills made significant contributions to our knowledge of how members of society go about living their daily lives. Mills stated: “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both”[1]. The sociological imagination links personal challenges to bigger social issues. Often referred to as biography and history, respectively, Mills differentiated between "issues" (larger social concerns) and "troubles" (particular struggles). People may make connections between events in their personal lives (biographies) and social realities due to Mills' sociological imagination (history). That is to say, people who think in this way can see the connections between their own lives and broader social problems.

Conclusion – In the end, I would like to conclude my paper by saying that, as C W MILLS said, we don’t need science all the time to understand any phenomena. At times we should use our imagination too. Dystopia is fast approaching with such pandemics and religious-leaning governments across the globe. We should understand and try to read and accept the signs of female dystopia approaching in the form of a government. As female dystopian literature is not just a fictional sub-genre with exaggerated realities but is cautionary tale of endangered humanities in which women will suffer the most. It’s high time we should take these cautionary tales seriously and stop living in denial that dystopia is just a fictional thing. The signs are already visible in many countries irrespective of whether they are highly developed or under-developing nations. The winds of change have already begun, so let’s wake up before it gets too late. As dystopia or sub-genre feminist dystopia is a disguised literary movement to prepare us for the looming threat around. As literature can influence the perspective of society. The research might bring an understanding of this looming threat, especially on a specific gender.

References