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SHAPES OF DYSTOPIA

TRENDS, CURRENTS AND RISKS

Paula Wieczorek
Aisha Khan
Areen Ansari
Qurratulaen Liaqat
Syeda Maham Fatima
Wareesha Batool Qureshi

Areena Zaman Bodla
Muhammad Hamza Ashfaq
Haider Ihsan Dawar
Karolina Kossakowska-Dehnert
Izabela Bełz-Kaczmarek

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CONTACT DETAILS

University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow
ul. Sucharskiego 235-225 Rzeszów
mail: sc@wsiz.edu.pl
https://journals.wsiz.edu.pl/sc
(0048) 17-866-14-63; (0048) 17-866-12-97

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Paula Wieczorek University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland, pwieczorek@wsiz.edu.pl

dystopia, utopia, digital culture, surveillance, literary studies

ABSTRACT

This special issue, Shapes of Dystopia, comprises nine research papers that explore dystopian imagination as a critical framework for interpreting contemporary social, political, ecological, and technological realities. Originating from the inaugural international conference held in Rzeszów in 2024, the volume approaches dystopia not merely as a literary genre, but as an analytical lens embedded in lived experience and philosophical inquiry. The contributions investigate dystopian narratives across literature, film, and digital culture, examining themes such as surveillance, migration, environmental collapse, gendered oppression, digital precarity, neuroculture, and posthuman identity. Collectively, the issue highlights the continued relevance of dystopian studies for understanding crisis, power, and speculative futures.

Introduction

This special issue of *Social Communication*, titled "Shapes of Dystopia" emerges from the first edition of the international conference "Shapes of Dystopia: Trends, Currents and Risks," held on May 14, 2024, at the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów. Co-organized by the Department of English Studies, the Research Club *Humanus*, and the Poster Design Club B-1, the event brought together scholars, students, artists, and practitioners to examine the cultural, philosophical, ecological, and technological dimensions of dystopian imagination across media. Crucially, the conference proceeded from the recognition that dystopia now exceeds the domain of literary speculation: it has entered philosophical and historical discourse as an analytical category for understanding lived reality, and in many contexts already constitutes a material condition rather than a hypothetical future. The meeting took place against an increasingly volatile and transformative global backdrop marked by accelerating ecological degradation, renewed geopolitical confrontation, the resurgence of illiberalism, and widening socio-economic disparities. At the same time, algorithmic governance, digital surveillance infrastructures, platform capitalism, and the commodification of attention reshape the structures of everyday life, influencing how individuals access information, form relationships, and conceptualize agency, subjectivity, and community. These overlapping crises — environmental, political, technological, and affective — destabilize established epistemological frameworks and call for critical methodologies capable of apprehending systemic uncertainty, cultural volatility, and post-truth conditions.

Thus, dystopian thought returns with renewed urgency and intellectual force. Once imagined primarily as a speculative horizon, dystopia now serves as a critical vocabulary for reading the present. It reveals the tensions that structure contemporary life — the entanglements of power and precarity, surveillance and vulnerability, crisis and possibility — and offers ways of thinking through what it means to inhabit a world under pressure. In this sense, dystopia is not a retreat into imagined catastrophe but a mode of attention, attuned to fragility, contradiction, and the search for alternative forms of living. The contributions in this issue pursue these questions across literary, cinematic, and digital landscapes. Together, they underscore the growing permeability between fiction and social reality, and the extent to which dystopian imagination has become a method for grasping the conditions of the present as much as for speculating about the future. These contributions affirm that dystopia has moved beyond a single genre or tradition; it has become a critical practice, a way of thinking with and through crisis, and a language for navigating worlds in transition.

The volume opens with **Paula Wieczorek's** examination of dystopia as a mode of cultural criticism, tracing its development from Enlightenment-era

utopian thought to contemporary algorithmic cultures and conceptualizing dystopian imagination as a diagnostic tool in the age of datafication and platform capitalism. **Syeda Maham Fatima** and **Qurratulaen Liaqat** then analyze *The Hunger Games*, exploring the nexus of spectacle, political domination, and resistance and demonstrating how mediated violence and ritualized rebellion function as technologies of governance. Moving from digital spectacle to transnational displacement, **Wareesha Batool Qureshi** and **Qurratulaen Liaqat** examine Exit West, foregrounding surveillance, migration, and bodily vulnerability within geopolitical border regimes. The theme of embodied political control continues in **Muhammad Hamza Ashfaq** and **Haider Ihsan Dawar's** reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which highlights the interplay of patriarchal authoritarianism, reproductive coercion, and ideological indoctrination alongside subtle modalities of agency and resistance.

The issue then transitions to ecological and digital terrains. **Areen Ansari** offers an ecofeminist analysis of *Children of Men*, situating the narrative within discourses on biopolitics and environmental ethics and illuminating the intersection of ecological collapse, militarization, and reproductive control. **Karolina Kossakowska-Dehnert** turns to the digital sphere, examining the internet as a contemporary dystopian environment shaped by algorithmic identity production, cyber-vulnerability, and affective commodification. Ethical agency in dystopian contexts is addressed by **Aisha Khan**, who draws on Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory to analyze how characters in Divergent negotiate loyalty, sacrifice, and autonomy under coercive structures. **Izabela Bełz-Kaczmarek** shifts the focus to affect and cognition in her discussion of "neuroculture," analyzing representations of emotional exhaustion, pharmaceutical sedation, and dopamine-driven consumerism to reveal the psychological infrastructures of contemporary dystopia. The volume concludes with **Areena Zaman Bodla's** study of Slaughterhouse-Five, which demonstrates how posthuman narrative strategies, temporal fragmentation, and metafiction destabilize humanist assumptions and articulate dystopian experience through trauma, memory, and distributed subjectivity.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue demonstrate the breadth and vitality of contemporary dystopian studies. Moving across literary, cinematic, and digital forms, they show how dystopian imagination has become a critical method for understanding the social, political, and ecological pressures shaping the present. Rather than depicting catastrophe alone, these works reveal how dystopian narratives diagnose structures of power and precarity while also tracing possibilities for resistance, adaptation, and alternative futures. As Baccolini and Moylan (2003) observe, critical dystopias maintain a horizon of transformation even in the face of oppressive systems. It is our hope that this collection fosters continued interdisciplinary dialogue and contributes meaningfully to the ongoing development of dystopian studies in subsequent conference editions and academic publications.

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The Many Shapes of Dystopia: From Literary Tradition to Media and Digital Spectacle

Paula Wieczorek University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland, pwieczorek@wsiz.edu.pl
dystopia, utopia, digital culture, surveillance, literary studies

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of dystopia from its literary origins to its contemporary digital manifestations, arguing that the genre has transformed from a speculative inversion of utopian ideals into a critical method for interpreting modern reality. By combining literary history (from More, Swift, and Zamyatin to Atwood and Butler), media analysis (film and television), and cultural critique (digital surveillance and algorithmic control), the study bridges traditionally distant fields and proposes a synthetic, interdisciplinary framework. Drawing on theorists such as Suvin, Moylan, Claeys, and Zuboff, it contends that dystopia has outgrown its status as a literary genre to become a cultural grammar for reading the world. Through comparative and theoretical analysis, the article demonstrates how dystopia functions as both narrative and methodology—mapping the interplay of power, technology, and identity in the digital age. The study shows that the mechanisms conceptualized in classic dystopias such as Nineteen Eighty-Four and The Handmaid's Tale—surveillance, linguistic control, and biopolitics—now operate through social media, algorithms, and self-performance. Ultimately, dystopia's many shapes reveal the humanities' enduring capacity to interpret and critique our algorithmic, mediated existence.

Introduction: The Many Lives of Dystopia

Few literary forms have proved as durable and adaptable as dystopia. Once a speculative inversion of utopian thought, it has become a cultural grammar for expressing anxieties about the future and critiques of the present. From classical literature to digital media, dystopia has undergone numerous mutations—textual, aesthetic, technological—while maintaining a core function: to confront the reader or viewer with what may come to pass if present trajectories continue unchecked. As Tom Moylan (2000) writes, dystopian fiction does not merely represent the collapse of ideal societies; it "maps the world through negation" and, in doing so, opens space for imagining otherwise (p. 147). Dystopia, in this sense, is both a critique of the real and a rehearsal of alternative futures.

The novelty and contribution of this paper lie in its synthetic scope and interdisciplinary character. Rather than uncovering a previously unknown phenomenon, the study offers a coherent and up-to-date narrative that bridges distant yet interrelated fields: literary history (from More to Atwood), media studies (including film and television), and the critique of digital culture (with references to Shoshana Zuboff's "surveillance capitalism"). The main argument advanced here is that dystopia has ceased to function merely as a literary genre—it has evolved into a method, a way of critically reading and narrating the mechanisms of power, control, and subjectivity that structure our everyday, digital reality. The analytical tools once applied to the study of *Nineteen Eighty-Four or The Handmaid's Tale*—concepts such as surveillance, linguistic control, and biopolitics—now illuminate the operations of social media algorithms, the performative nature of online identity, and the subtle architectures of consent that shape networked life. By connecting classical literary analysis with contemporary reflections on technology and society, this paper addresses a significant gap in dystopian studies. It demonstrates that the humanities—often perceived as retrospective disciplines—provide essential frameworks for understanding the present. Dystopia, redefined here as both narrative and method, becomes a key to decoding the cultural logic of the digital age.

This paper traces the evolution of dystopia from its literary origins—Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921)—to its contemporary manifestations in speculative fiction, visual media, aesthetic culture, and internet-based experience. It examines dystopia as a narrative, aesthetic, and social

form, one that has shifted from utopian experimentation to a dominant mode of perceiving and narrating contemporary reality. Dystopia today appears not only in literature but in games, film, digital platforms, and cultural practices—its "shapes" multiplying across genres and media (Jameson, 2005, p. 199).

Central to this paper is the argument that dystopian fiction now functions as a hybrid space of resistance, critique, and imaginative possibility. Building on established scholarship (Suvin, 1979; Moylan, 2000; Claeys, 2017), this paper contends that dystopia is not merely a fictional genre but a method—a way of thinking and imagining through crisis. While dystopian narratives may depict oppression, ecological collapse, or techno-authoritarianism, they frequently preserve a residual utopian impulse: an insistence that things could be different (Levitas, 2013, p. xi; Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 10).

Utopia and Dystopia in Literary Tradition

The modern concept of dystopia cannot be fully grasped without a clear understanding of its utopian counterpart. The two are deeply interrelated: dystopias invert, satirize, or deconstruct the aspirations of utopian thought. From their inception, utopian texts have been more than mere blueprints for ideal societies; they have functioned as speculative devices for critiquing the present and probing the limits of human perfectibility. As Ruth Levitas (2013) insists, utopia is best understood not as a static model of perfection but as a "method" for exploring social alternatives and disrupting dominant ideological frameworks (p. xi).

The genealogy begins with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which coined the term itself—a pun on the *Greek ou-topos* ("no place") and *eu-topos* ("good place")—and established many of the genre's central concerns: the organization of labor, the distribution of property, education, and governance. More's text is often misread as a proposal rather than what it is: a dialogic, satirical meditation on the contradictions of his time, particularly the enclosures, corruption, and violence of Tudor England (Claeys, 2017, p. 21). The utopian island is described by Raphael Hythloday, a traveler whose very name ("nonsense speaker") undermines the authority of the account and foregrounds the instability of utopian discourse.

This ambiguous utopian tone continued in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), which imagines a scientific society governed by rational inquiry and benevolent paternalism. While Bacon's narrative affirms the Enlightenment faith in progress and order, it also inadvertently signals the dangers of epistemic hierarchy and technocratic control (Fitting, 2001, p. 139). Likewise, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), especially the voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms, satirizes not only political corruption but the very Enlightenment values—reason, order, and rationality—that underpin many early utopias. Swift's work complicates the genre by showing that the pursuit of perfection can lead to its opposite: dehumanization and alienation.

The transition from utopia to dystopia occurs not at a fixed point, but through the gradual collapse of utopia's premises. As Gregory Claeys (2017) notes, dystopia often emerges from the ashes of failed utopias, where the desire for order, equality, or happiness becomes a rationale for surveillance, repression, or uniformity (p. 105). The utopian impulse—imagining better worlds—remains embedded in dystopia, but is refracted through the lens of historical trauma: industrialization, totalitarianism, world wars, and ecological collapse.

The twentieth century marks a clear shift toward anti-utopian and dystopian literature, especially in the interwar and postwar periods. Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), a key precursor to later dystopias, dramatizes the conflict between individual desire and collective discipline in a mathematically ordered totalitarian state. Written as a response to the early years of the Soviet regime, *We* constructs a dystopia where transparency is enforced through architecture (glass walls) and emotions are treated as pathology (Zamyatin, 1993, p. 58). Zamyatin's influence on both Aldous Huxley and George Orwell is well documented, and both authors would expand the critique of utopia into darker, more pessimistic territory.

Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's 1984 (1949) represent the two dominant models of modern dystopia: the former through pleasure and conditioning, the latter through surveillance and terror. In Huxley's World State, citizens are pacified through drugs (soma), engineered satisfaction, and the eradication of familial and cultural memory. Happiness is enforced, but meaning is evacuated. In contrast, Orwell's 1984 imagines a state ruled by fear, falsification, and linguistic

control, where history is rewritten and thought itself is policed. As Claeys (2017) puts it, Huxley feared that we would be destroyed by our desires, Orwell that we would be destroyed by our fears—and both visions have left deep marks on how dystopia is imagined in literature and beyond (p. 123).

What unites these texts is not only their critique of specific political systems, but their formal experimentation with genre. Each uses speculative settings to explore epistemological and ethical questions: What does it mean to be human? What is freedom? How does power operate through ideology, language, and technology? In doing so, they establish dystopia as a literary space of cognitive estrangement, a concept that Darko Suvin (1979) defines as the "imaginative framework that estranges the reader from the real world and then returns them to it with new critical awareness" (p. 4). Dystopia thus becomes not merely a fiction of disaster, but a mode of critical thinking. Utopian and dystopian literature, then, must be read not as opposites but as dialectical partners—two modes that challenge, respond to, and revise one another. As Moylan (2000) argues, even the most totalizing dystopian worlds often contain utopian residues—small acts of resistance, subversive memory, or speculative hope (p. 195). This dialectic continues in contemporary dystopian fiction, which often blends horror with longing, and collapse with the faint pulse of possibility.

Feminist and Eco-Dystopias: Narrative Resistance

While the classical dystopias of the twentieth century portrayed authoritarian regimes that subdued individuals through surveillance or sedation, feminist and ecological dystopias of the later twentieth century offered a different kind of intervention. These works did not merely invert utopia or expose political systems gone wrong; they recast dystopia as a site of embodied critique, foregrounding the intersections of gender, environment, technology, and narrative itself. In doing so, they challenged the masculinist and rationalist logics of both utopian and dystopian traditions, proposing alternative ways of imagining subjectivity, resistance, and collective survival.

Feminist dystopias emerged as part of a broader critique of patriarchal structures in the 1960s and 1970s, and they often drew on science fiction to imagine radically different futures. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) is one of the earliest and most complex examples. Through its fragmented narrative and multiple protagonists, the novel collapses the boundaries between genre, voice, and reality. Russ imagines a parallel world, Whileaway, where men have died out and women have built a peaceful, post-industrial society. But this utopian space is framed by the dystopian experiences of women in other timelines, particularly those trapped in systems of domestic oppression. As Jeanne Cortiel (1999) argues, Russ's narrative strategy resists closure and coherence, mirroring the instability of female identity under patriarchy (p. 94).

Similarly, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) presents a dual vision of the future: one a hopeful ecofeminist commune, the other a techno-capitalist nightmare. The protagonist, Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, a Latina woman institutionalized in a psychiatric facility, becomes a kind of time-traveling witness to these competing futures. Her body, marked by trauma, class, and gender, becomes the site through which dystopia and utopia are experienced. As Baccolini and Moylan (2003) emphasize, Piercy's work is emblematic of what they term the "critical dystopia"—a form that retains the dark realism of traditional dystopia but refuses the finality of total despair (p. 10). In critical dystopias, the protagonist may be trapped, but the narrative gestures toward transformation.

The most influential feminist dystopia of the late twentieth century is arguably Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Set in the theocratic Republic of Gilead, the novel depicts a society in which women's bodies have become state property, reduced to reproductive functions and stripped of autonomy. Yet Atwood resists the label of "science fiction," preferring the term "speculative fiction" to describe a world assembled entirely from historical precedent (Atwood, 2011, p. 6). The novel's power lies not only in its chilling depiction of gendered violence, but in its meta-narrative frame: Offred's voice is preserved through illicit storytelling, encoded in tapes and archives. Storytelling itself becomes a mode of survival and resistance, a theme that echoes across feminist dystopias.

Feminist dystopian narratives often align with ecological concerns, particularly around the commodification of women's bodies and the degradation

of the environment. The convergence of gender and ecology is a hallmark of ecofeminism, a critical framework developed by theorists like Karen J. Warren (2000) and Vandana Shiva (1989). Ecofeminist dystopias highlight how patriarchal systems exploit both women and nature through mechanisms of control, extraction, and erasure. In Piercy's novel, for example, the utopian community of Mattapoisett is not only gender-equitable but also ecologically sustainable, suggesting that feminist liberation is inseparable from environmental justice (Cortiel, 1999, p. 102). This intersection becomes even more urgent in later works such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), which blends dystopian collapse with spiritual and ecological regeneration. Set in a near-future America ravaged by climate change, privatization, and social decay, the novel follows Lauren Olamina, a young Black woman with a condition called "hyperempathy," who founds a new belief system—Earthseed—as a way to navigate destruction and reimagine community. Butler's novel resists the bleak finality of classical dystopia, instead offering what Baccolini (2017) describes as a "resistance narrative", in which survival is not just physical but conceptual, based on the creation of new epistemologies (p. 35).

Finally, Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* (2006), though not literary, builds on these traditions. Adapted from P. D. James's novel, the film depicts a world in which human reproduction has mysteriously ceased, leading to global collapse and authoritarian governance. The dystopia here is both demographic and symbolic: a loss of futurity, of hope, of meaning. Yet amid the violence and decay, the appearance of a pregnant woman—miraculously immune to the global infertility—rekindles a utopian possibility. The film's visual aesthetic, its religious iconography, and its depiction of refugees and surveillance resonate with both feminist and ecological dystopias. Thus, the film reclaims dystopia not as an end, but as a threshold for reimagining life. Together, these feminist and ecological dystopias mark a crucial shift in the genre. They redefine dystopia not only as critique, but as a narrative practice of survival. In contrast to the closed systems of Orwell or Huxley, these works insist on relationality, embodiment, and transformation. They foreground voices and bodies traditionally marginalized in dystopian literature and posit storytelling—not escape, but witness—as the most powerful form of resistance.

While feminist and ecological reconfigurations of dystopia have expanded the genre's political and affective scope, a further turn toward non-Western traditions reveals how the dystopian imagination is itself culturally contingent. Although this paper focuses primarily on Anglo-American and European contexts, a fuller understanding of dystopia must also acknowledge the vital traditions that emerge beyond them. Indigenous, African, Asian, and Latin American writers have developed parallel, and often resistant, modes of speculative narration that challenge the Western association of dystopia with the future.

For many Indigenous authors, dystopia is not a hypothetical tomorrow but an ongoing historical condition—an apocalypse already lived through colonization, dispossession, and environmental devastation. Works such as Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* reconfigure tropes of state surveillance and reproductive control to address questions of sovereignty, kinship, and survival. Similarly, within the growing field of Indigenous Futurism, dystopian motifs become vehicles for imagining continuance and reciprocity rather than collapse, centering communal resilience, ancestral knowledge, and ecological balance as acts of defiance. Comparable strategies can be found in Afrofuturist, Latin American, and Asian speculative narratives, which link dystopian imagery to histories of slavery, dictatorship, or techno-imperialism.

Together, these global and decolonial perspectives demonstrate that dystopia is not a singular Western invention but a flexible language for articulating collective trauma and envisioning alternative futures. They open essential directions for further research by showing how different cultural histories and cosmologies shape what dystopia means, how it feels, and what forms of hope may still emerge within it.

Beyond the Book: Dystopia in Contemporary Media

As dystopian themes have become increasingly pervasive in the cultural imagination, they have also moved beyond the confines of literary fiction into visual, cinematic, and multimedia expressions. This transition has not only broadened the audience for dystopian narratives, but also transformed the genre's aesthetic and political functions. From blockbuster film

franchises to prestige television and digital art, dystopia today functions as both a spectacle and a method of critique. The medium has changed, but the concerns—surveillance, control, inequality, environmental collapse—remain disturbingly familiar.

One of the most visible examples of this shift is *The Hunger Games* series (2008–2020), which began as a young adult (YA) novel trilogy by Suzanne Collins and became a global film phenomenon. Set in a future autocratic society, Panem, the series dramatizes a world divided into center and periphery, where televised violence—ritualized as the titular games—functions as both entertainment and political repression. Drawing on theories by Guy Debord (1967/1994) and Walter Benjamin (1936/2008), critics have argued that *The Hunger Games* exemplifies the "spectacularization" of dystopia. The games are not only a form of control, but also a form of aestheticized violence, consumed by the Capitol and—metafictionally—by the viewer. As Sebastián-Martín (2021) notes, the series "beautifies dystopia" even as it critiques it, inviting audiences to question their complicity in systems of mediated violence (p. 97).

This ambivalence—the simultaneous critique and consumption of dystopia—is a defining feature of contemporary media. In the television series *Black Mirror* (2011–2019), dystopia becomes intimate and proximate: it unfolds in familiar domestic settings, powered by technologies just adjacent to our own. Each episode stages a speculative scenario—social rating systems, AI partners, neural implants—that exposes the ethical blind spots of digital life. Unlike traditional dystopias that rely on elaborate world-building, *Black Mirror* locates dystopia in the mundane: dating apps, home security systems, social media feedback loops. These scenarios do not warn of distant futures; they expose the dystopian potential embedded in the present. The aestheticization of dystopia also appears in visual culture and fashion. In recent years, dystopian motifs—gas masks, industrial decay, biometric interfaces—have become prominent in graphic design, runway shows, and video games. As Debord (1967/1994) argues, such motifs form part of the "society of the spectacle," a visual grammar through which late-capitalist societies express and aestheticize their own anxieties and contradictions (p. 25). This aesthetic often hovers between critique and fetishization, revealing the unstable position of dystopia in the cultural marketplace. Just as Huxley's *Brave New World* anticipated a society pacified through pleasure, contemporary dystopian aesthetics risk becoming anesthetizing rather than awakening.

Yet media dystopias also offer critical possibilities, particularly in the space of popular culture. Franchises such as *The Matrix, V for Vendetta, Children of Men*, and *Snowpiercer* engage deeply with political theory, class struggle, biopower, and environmental collapse. These narratives operate not only as speculative fiction but as ideological allegories, dramatizing the tension between oppression and resistance. For example, *Snowpiercer* (2013), directed by Bong Joon-ho, envisions a post-apocalyptic train perpetually circling a frozen Earth, divided rigidly by class. The train itself becomes a moving metaphor for capitalist hierarchy, environmental catastrophe, and the illusion of progress. As passengers move from the rear cars to the front, the film enacts a literal traversal of inequality—one that ends not in victory, but in catastrophe and the faint hope of ecological rebirth.

Importantly, these media narratives often echo the structures and motifs of literary dystopia, even as they reconfigure them. The use of first-person narration, unreliable memory, archival frames, and intertextuality—so prominent in Atwood or Piercy—is adapted visually through voiceovers, fragmented timelines, and embedded recordings. These formal techniques, as Baccolini and Moylan (2003) have shown, emphasize the constructedness of narrative and the importance of remembering in the face of erasure (p. 12). In *Children of Men*, for instance, the use of long takes and documentary-like realism positions the viewer not as distant observer, but as participant in a collapsing world. The camera does not mediate safety; it implicates.

Moreover, contemporary media increasingly blur the boundary between fiction and reality. Dystopian aesthetics are not confined to narrative content; they permeate interface design, social media platforms, and virtual environments. As the next section will explore, the digital world does not merely represent dystopia—it performs it. The aesthetics of digital surveillance, gamification, and algorithmic control constitute a new kind of lived dystopia, one that must be critically understood not just as entertainment, but as everyday ideology.

In this sense, dystopia has become a cultural

method, not just a genre. As Jameson (2005) famously noted, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (p. 199). Contemporary media dystopias both reflect and reinforce this condition. They confront us with crisis, but also demand that we reimagine critique, resistance, and utopian longing in an age where spectacle often overwhelms meaning.

Digital Dystopias: Internet, Surveillance, and Identity

If literary dystopias once warned of future regimes of control, the digital present reveals that many of those warnings have already materialized. In the contemporary moment, the dystopian imagination no longer belongs exclusively to fiction; it increasingly animates the structure of everyday life, especially in the digital domain. Surveillance, identity fragmentation, performative subjectivity, and algorithmic manipulation are no longer speculative fears—they are infrastructural realities. The internet, once hailed as a utopian space of democratization and free expression, now functions for many as a hyperreal dystopia, governed by opaque systems of power, commodification, and social engineering.

This shift is evident in how digital platforms mediate identity and visibility. Social media, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, operate on the logic of self-surveillance—a voluntary performance of the self for an imagined audience, measured by metrics of engagement, reach, and aesthetic coherence. This condition has been described by scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff (2019) as part of "surveillance capitalism," in which user data becomes the raw material for profit, and behavioral prediction replaces autonomy (p. 95). The curated digital self becomes both product and prisoner, caught between exhibition and control. The dystopian character of these platforms is intensified by algorithmic governance. Unlike traditional state surveillance, which functions through visibility and fear, algorithmic control is often invisible, ambient, and data-driven. Feeds are curated, desires predicted, and behaviors shaped without users' conscious awareness. This form of "soft dystopia" operates not through coercion but through interface design, gamification, and feedback loops that reward conformity and discourage deviation. The digital user becomes a node in a system optimized for retention, not reflection.

Moreover, the boundary between truth and fiction, public and private, has become increasingly unstable in the digital realm. The proliferation of deepfakes, AI-generated content, and manipulated imagery challenges epistemological certainty and ethical accountability. While dystopian literature has long addressed propaganda and misinformation (1984 being the archetype), the velocity and scale of digital distortion create new forms of disorientation. As Benjamin (1936/2008) foresaw, the reproduction of images has altered the very status of the real, collapsing distance and inviting a politics of perception rather than fact (p. 40). Even more insidious are the forms of symbolic and psychological violence that emerge in digital contexts. Online harassment, doxxing, image-based abuse, and algorithmic bias disproportionately affect women, queer people, and marginalized communities. These phenomena echo the structural concerns of feminist dystopias—control over bodies, erasure of voice, commodification of identity—but in a decentralized, crowd-sourced, and often unregulated environment. The digital world replicates, and in many cases amplifies, the biopolitical concerns of Atwood, Butler, and Piercy: who is seen, who is silenced, who is disposable?

Digital dystopias also reshape the concept of memory. In speculative fiction, memory often functions as a battleground—its preservation or erasure central to power. In 1984, history is rewritten daily; in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's memories are her only link to a past self. Today, digital memory is both permanent and fragile. Posts, photos, and comments persist in databases long after they are deleted by users, yet collective attention shifts rapidly, and platforms collapse or become inaccessible. The result is a volatile archive, one that promises immortality while threatening erasure. As Archer-Lean and Ashcroft (2021) note, contemporary dystopias frequently engage with themes of "temporal disjunction"—the inability to maintain continuity between past, present, and future (p. 4). In this context, dystopia no longer requires a totalitarian state or apocalyptic event; it unfolds in the banality of digital interaction. The logic of monitoring, control, and depersonalization is embedded in apps, notifications, and metrics. The utopian promise of connection and expression has been replaced by the reality of extraction and gamified performance. Yet, as with earlier dystopias, there remain traces of resistance. Users manipulate algorithms, construct counter-publics, engage in digital

activism, and experiment with new forms of anonymity, irony, and refusal. This resistance often takes shape in practices that directly subvert the logic of surveillance capitalism. For instance, users engage in 'data obfuscation'—generating noisy or false data to confuse tracking algorithms—or participate in 'meme culture,' which frequently uses irony and satire to critique platform-specific absurdities and the broader political landscape. Furthermore, the creation of decentralized, encrypted communication channels and alternative social platforms represents a more structural refusal of the terms set by mainstream digital environments. These acts, though often small-scale, demonstrate a critical awareness and an attempt to reclaim agency within an infrastructure designed for passive consumption and control. Importantly, the digital dystopia is not monolithic. It varies by geography, gender, class, and access. The experiences of a Western academic user differ dramatically from those of a teenage TikTok creator in South Korea or an activist in Iran. Just as literary dystopias evolved to include feminist, ecological, and postcolonial perspectives, digital dystopias must be understood as intersectional phenomena, shaped by specific contexts and histories.

In sum, the dystopian condition of digital life reveals how the genre has transcended fiction to become method: a way of reading, sensing, and narrating the world. The internet is not merely a setting for dystopia; it is a medium through which dystopian structures are lived. To engage critically with this terrain, we must draw on the analytical tools provided by literary dystopias—estrangement, fragmentation, unreliable narration—recalibrated for a world in which the interface has become ideological.

Conclusion

The many shapes of dystopia, from Renaissance satire to contemporary digital spectacle, reveal its extraordinary capacity for reinvention and its enduring relevance as both a literary and cultural form. As this paper has argued, dystopia has outgrown its initial role as a speculative inversion of utopian thought and has become a pervasive language through which modern societies articulate fear, critique, and desire. The genre's historical evolution—from More's ironic Utopia and Swift's political allegory to Zamyatin's mathematically ordered totalitarianism and Atwood's feminist reclamation—illustrates how dystopia continuously redefines itself in response to new cultural and technological conditions. Its transformation from the printed page to the digital screen mirrors the transformation of modern consciousness itself: fragmented, mediated, and increasingly aware of its complicity in the systems it seeks to critique.

In tracing dystopia's trajectory across centuries and media, we discover that its most unsettling power lies not in its pessimism but in its accuracy. The dystopian imagination has always functioned as an early warning system, a speculative form of social diagnosis that exposes the hidden logics of domination, rationalization, and control. Today, those logics have migrated into algorithmic infrastructures, surveillance architectures, and networked systems of power that shape everyday life. The contemporary digital sphere—governed by visibility, data extraction, and performative identity—renders dystopia not an imagined elsewhere but a lived condition. The mechanisms of self-surveillance and gamified conformity that populate social platforms echo the disciplinary regimes envisioned by Orwell, Huxley, and Zamyatin, yet they operate through consent rather than coercion, through pleasure rather than fear.

And yet, dystopia endures because it resists closure. Even within its most totalizing visions, there remains the trace of what Tom Moylan calls the "utopian residue": the stubborn conviction that critique can itself be transformative. To write or read dystopia is to refuse resignation, to hold open the imaginative space where alternative futures can still be conceived. Feminist and ecological reworkings of the genre have shown that dystopia can be relational rather than terminal—a space of witness, memory, and resilience rather than annihilation. Similarly, digital dystopias, while they often mirror the bleakness of algorithmic capitalism, also generate counter-narratives: acts of irony, resistance, and creative subversion that reclaim agency within systems designed to erode it.

Ultimately, the study of dystopia is an ethical and imaginative endeavor. It demands that we read the world critically, attending to the subtle ways in which power embeds itself in discourse, design, and desire. The internet, as this paper has suggested, is not simply a setting for dystopian storytelling but a medium through which dystopian structures are enacted and contested. To interpret it through the lens of literary dystopia

is to recognize that the genre has become a method of perception—a way of seeing, feeling, and narrating life in the Anthropocene.

Understanding dystopia's many shapes, therefore, is not only an act of scholarship but of vigilance. It enables us to map the boundaries between fiction and reality, despair and defiance, critique and creation. In an age when speculative imagination and lived experience increasingly intertwine, dystopia reminds us that the future is not a distant horizon but a mirror we construct every day—and that imagining otherwise remains our most radical act of hope.

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Aestheticizing Politics and Politicizing Aesthetics: The Dialectic of Power and Resistance in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*

Syeda Maham Fatima Postgraduate Research Scholar, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, 7mahamfatima7@gmail.com
Qurratulaen Liaqat Associate Professor, Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, qurratulaen@fccollege.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic interplay between aesthetics and politics in Suzanne Collins's dystopian novel The Hunger Games. It examines how the Capitol's construction of spectacle and propaganda aestheticizes violence and control, while the resistance movement led by Katniss Everdeen politicizes aesthetics to challenge hegemonic power structures. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, the study investigates how aesthetics function as a medium of both domination and resistance. The analysis focuses on the Capitol's use of visual and performative elements—from the luxurious costumes of its citizens to the meticulously orchestrated pageantry of the Games—to reinforce its authoritarian rule and legitimize systemic violence. At the same time, characters such as Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark subvert this spectacle through acts of defiance and self-representation that politicize beauty, performance, and symbolism. By weaponizing aesthetics, the protagonists transform tools of oppression into instruments of dissent, destabilizing the Capitol's narrative and inspiring collective resistance. The paper ultimately demonstrates how art and politics intersect to shape perception, ideology, and social change in contemporary dystopian fiction.

Introduction

The fusion of aesthetics and politics for ideological purposes has been around since ancient Egypt and Rome. Throughout history, aesthetics has been a powerful tool used to both legitimize and challenge political power. On one hand, we have powerful regimes employing the aestheticization of politics, a concept coined by Walter Benjamin (1969), to warrant their authoritarian rule, intimidate the population, and distract everyone from their oppressive tactics. On the other hand, marginalized communities and oppressed groups have politicized aesthetics as a means of resistance to expose injustices, subvert dominant narratives, and make their presence visible in the public sphere. With the advent of mass media, this manipulation of aesthetics has become more widespread and effective in the contemporary age. The current study explores the intersection of aesthetics and politics in Suzanne Collins' novel *The Hunger Games*, the first part of the trilogy. By applying Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord's theoretical frameworks, this paper highlights the transformative potential of aesthetics in contesting and reconfiguring power structures in the dystopian society of *The Hunger Games*.

Suzanne Collins's widely acclaimed dystopian series, consisting of *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, is set in a place called Panem, a post-apocalyptic nation governed by a totalitarian regime under the leadership of President Snow. At the heart of the trilogy is the annual event called the Hunger Games, a competition broadcast live across all twelve districts of Panem, meant to pacify, entertain, and instil fear in the populace. As Wright (2012) describes them, "[The games] represent a media event much like the Olympic—but combined with the horrific spectacle of a tragedy like 9/11" (p. 98). Through various theatrical, artistic, and dramatic components, Collins highlights that aesthetics are not mere accessories to power but have become intrinsic to its construction and perpetuation.

The current study highlights how President Snow's iron-fisted governance serves as a tangible manifestation of Benjamin's (1969) concept of the aestheticization of politics and Debord's (1983) idea of a spectacle. The opulent extravagance of the Capitol, with its luxurious costumes, grandiose events like the Hunger Games, and carefully curated media narratives, all serve to create a facade of prosperity and order. However, beneath this veneer of glamour lies a brutal reality of oppression and exploitation. By aestheticizing his rule, Snow not only masks the inherent violence and injustice of his regime but also legitimizes it in the eyes of the citizens. This manipulation of aesthetics in the service of politics underscores the insidious nature of authoritarianism, where the spectacle of power becomes a tool for subjugation.

This paper further posits that while Capitol carries out its aestheticized oppression, resistance emerges through the act of politicizing aesthetics by characters Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. They use the same sites of aesthetic engagements on which Capitol has built its power and ideology to work in their favour. By transforming the games and other visual symbols into emblems of their rebellion, Katniss and her allies challenge President Snow's dominance. Therefore, this paper demonstrates the dual role of aesthetics in *The Hunger Games* as both instruments of domination and catalysts for resistance. By engaging with the philosophies of Benjamin and Debord, this research highlights the defining characteristic of the dystopian genre: the complex relationship between art, politics, and power.

This study aims to investigate how the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* employs aesthetic elements within political discourse to consolidate and sustain its totalitarian rule over Panem. It further seeks to explore how characters such as Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark engage with and manipulate aesthetics as a means of resistance against the authoritarian regime. Finally, the research examines how aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics contribute to the construction of dystopia in the novel, revealing how visual spectacle and symbolic performance function as both instruments of oppression and tools for subversion.

This research adopts a qualitative methodology rooted in textual analysis to examine *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Through close reading, the study analyzes key narrative elements, character developments, and symbolic representations to reveal the ways in which aesthetics function as both instruments of control and weapons of resistance within the text. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, the analysis focuses on the relationship between spectacle, visual culture, political authority, and subaltern revolt. Specific attention is given to the Capitol's use of pageantry, fashion, and performative media as mechanisms for reinforcing authoritarian power, as well as to the aesthetic strategies employed by characters such as Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark to resist the Capitol's totalitarian rule. This interpretive approach enables a critical exploration of how aesthetic forms mediate power relations, support ideological narratives, and provoke acts of rebellion within a dystopian setting. By situating the novel within broader discourses of political aesthetics and critical theory, the study aims to contribute to scholarly conversations on the role of art, media, and symbolism in shaping sociopolitical consciousness in literature.

Theoretical and Critical Background

Benjamin (1930) reviewed a collection of essays entitled *War and Warriors*, edited by Ernst Jünger, a prominent figure in the Conservative Revolution movement in Germany. Benjamin, who leaned towards left politics and Marxist notions, was apprehensive of the ideas presented in the collection, particularly the glorification of war and the militaristic ethos promoted by Jünger and his contemporaries. He commented that this romanticization of war and death is "nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself" (1930, as cited in Jay, 1992, p. 41). The remark reflected Benjamin's critique of stripping war of its real-world consequences and ethical considerations and transforming it into a pure, autonomous experience, much like a work of art, a phenomenon quite visible in Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

Six years later, in his essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin (2020) expanded this analysis beyond war to politics and introduced the concept of the aestheticization of politics. According to him, fascism tends to turn politics into a spectacle, offering the masses the illusion of expression and participation but refusing to acknowledge their rights (p. 19). Through these measures, fascist regimes ensure that the proletariat cannot challenge the existing power structures. Benjamin's complex notion of the aestheticization of politics sparked and accumulated a rich and diverse body of literature. As Jay (1992) notes, "The fateful link between aesthetics and politics was eagerly seized on in many quarters as an invaluable explanation for the seductive fascination of fascism" (p. 42). Kinser and Kleinman (1969), in their book *The Dream That Was No More a Dream*, connected Benjamin's ideas with Nazism, stating that the "German consciousness treated its own reality-developed and lived its history-as though it were a work of art. It was a culture committed to its aesthetic imagination" (p. 7). Commentator Stern (1976) highlighted Hitler's history as a failed artist in the Nazism context, and

critics like Sontag (1980) saw the blurring of reality and fantasy in films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* as symbolic of the deceptive spectacle central to fascist politics. Friedlander has accused even modern representations of the fascist past of being excessively aestheticized, though in the form of kitsch art (Jay, 1992, p. 42).

Other accounts raise questions over Benjamin's stark and seemingly simple distinction between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art. Hansen (1987) contends that the descriptive tone of the essay and its "one-sided and reductive gesture . . . cannot be taken at its face value" (p. 180). Similarly, Buck-Morss (1992) proposes that although Benjamin advocates for communism to counteract fascism's aestheticization of politics by politicizing art, he reduces it "...merely to make culture a vehicle for Communist propaganda" (pp. 4–5). Azoulay (2010) defines Benjamin's ideas as misleading because "the aestheticization is of the political, while the politicization at hand is of art, not of the aesthetics" (p. 245). This, in turn, triggered further debates about the practice of art within the academic milieu.

Benjamin's hypothesis about fascism's introduction of aesthetics into the political realm has been expanded upon by many thinkers. Guy Debord's (1983) concept of a spectacle, outlined in his book *The Society of the Spectacle,* converges with the discourse of aesthetics and politics. As Cooper puts it:

> how the spectacle [i.e., a commodified worldview conveyed mainly through the mass media and other forms of ideological control] affects our understandings of time, history, the operations of power and the media, the built environments in which we live, our social relations and our subjective experiences. (as cited in Kujawska-Lis, 2018, p. 12)

His ideas provide critical lenses through which scholars analyze the multifaceted roles of photography, film, artificial intelligence (AI), and print within media landscapes. Sanders (2020), in her article "The Relationship Between Image and Spectator: The Case of the Advertisement" explores the relationship between consumers and advertisements through Debord's theoretical framework. She argues that since advertisements are proven to influence societal attitudes and behaviors, "A de-emphasis of the power of the image ignores this persistent effect on society, and the mechanism by which an image persuades not just individuals, but masses of people, is clearly at play in the case of the advertising image" (p. 3). Her study depicts the dangerous potential of advertisements in shaping the masses as proposed by Debord.

Debord's ideas have also been utilized in the literary sphere. Kujawska-Lis's (2018) article, "Conrad and the Society of the Spectacle," discusses Debord's and Joseph Conrad's conflicting views on the spectacle. According to her, Debord saw the spectacle as a stultifying commodity, while Conrad viewed his literary spectacle as a way to engage readers actively with the complex mysteries of humanity and the universe (p. 12). Kujawska-Lis is concerned with how complex literary works like Conrad's are being reimagined and transformed within a culture increasingly dominated by media.

Extensive research has been conducted on *The Hunger Games*, exploring the series from multiple perspectives. Burke (2013) discusses in her article how the novel sheds light on the pressing social and environmental issues of food and hunger. The book illuminates how the rich have monopolized the food system, denying the poor access to the food they produce. Burke observes that the book suggests that compassion and selflessness have the potential to challenge global exploitation, resonating especially with millennials. The scarcity of compassion in Collins's dystopian world makes it revolutionary, igniting societal change. Like many others, Tompkins (2018) carries out a Marxist analysis of the books. He states that the series can be viewed as a "...melodramatic fantasy that, on the one hand, bids spectators to enjoy the act of desiring class revolution in the films while, on the other hand, deploying various textual and paratextual strategies that invite audiences to be cynical about such desire" (p. 70). His article highlights how *The Hunger Games* franchise exemplifies capitalist media exploiting revolutionary sentiments for commercial gain.

The series has also been of great interest to queer studies. McGuire (2015), in her article, reassesses "Lee Edelman's work on the futurism of "the Child" by examining contemporary cultural spectacles of dead children, exemplified in The Hunger Games" (p. 63). She analyzes the convergence of queer children with killer children in the text. Rigsby et al. (2019) also draw

on Lee Edelman's work alongside Judith Butler in their article, "To Kill a Mockingjay: Katniss's Corrosive Queerness in the Hunger Games Trilogy." In the third book, Katniss rejects both the dystopian political alternatives that President Snow and Coin presented to her. She chooses her future over the future of the state. The article interprets her decision as a manifestation of "a community that is constituted by shared work, mutual interest, and memorial rather than futurity" (p. 403). The authors suggest that the trilogy's ending can be seen as a utopian response to oppressive regimes.

Ruthven (2017) examines the book from a feminist angle in her article "The contemporary postfeminist dystopia: disruptions and hopeful gestures in Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games." She examines the trilogy to explore how contemporary post-feminism can be interpreted as a dystopian narrative. She claims that "The protagonist of the novel...through an ethics of care, disruption of the heteronormative script, and a critical posthuman embodiment offers an alternative to the dystopic present offered by postfeminism" (p. 47). Ruthven posits that Collins, through Katniss' dystopian society, emphasizes the ongoing necessity of feminist politics rooted in activism, countering narratives of neoliberal individualism.

Other noteworthy scholarship on *The Hunger Games* includes Günenç's (2022) Foucauldian analysis of surveillance and oppressive authority in the text, Muller's (2012) discussion of the risks of virtual entertainment, and Heit's (2015) examination of the political dimensions of the series. Turnbull (2019) reads the novel as a trauma narrative, whereas Ghoshal and Wilkinson (2017) investigate the portrayal of PTSD and its effect on teenagers in the novel.

While all of these studies offer insightful debates about *The Hunger Games* across multiple disciplines, none of the current academic works explicitly examine the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the novel. The existing literature fails to address how the aesthetic representation of rebellion and oppression not only reflects but also actively shapes the political discourse within the narrative. This research aims to fill this gap by examining how the interplay of aesthetics and politics in the first part of the trilogy intensifies the tension between power and resistance in the text, thereby providing new insights into the dystopian literature's engagement with contemporary socio-political issues.

Aestheticizing Politics and Politicizing Aesthetics in *The Hunger Games*

Suzanne Collins mentioned that her inspiration for writing *The Hunger Games* trilogy came from flipping through TV channels, where she saw young people competing for money on reality shows and deadly footage of the Iraq war in which people were struggling to survive (Muller, 2012, p. 52). The birth of the idea for this renowned dystopian fiction stemmed from the jarring juxtaposition of reality TV's frivolous entertainment and the harsh realities of war, and how casually and effortlessly these contrasting worlds are presented side by side on television. Collins recreates this notion in her trilogy to reflect how aesthetics and politics are deeply intertwined, simultaneously upholding and dismantling power hierarchies.

According to Benjamin (2007), "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (p. 19). In *The Hunger Games,* the authoritarian rule of President Snow over Panem is a working model of Benjamin's concept of aestheticization of politics. His fascist regime strategically employs visual and performative elements, transforming his repressive governance into a theatrical performance that manipulates public perception and maintains control over the districts.

One of the ways through which Snow utilizes aesthetics to cater to his politics is by creating a spectacle of the whole of Panem. Debord (1983) states, "The Spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" and "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (p. 7). President Snow creates two types of spectacles: the Capitol and the districts. He also micromanages the relationship between these two spectacles by ensuring that they are worlds apart, creating a deep divide that prevents any mutual understanding or empathy between them. Therefore, the citizens of the districts and the Capitol are never able to see each other, instead, they just perceive one another in the form of distorted and manipulated images.

The Capitol, which is the world of President Snow, is a glittering city of excess, where the wealth and technologies are on full display. From flamboyant fashion and makeup to exotic food and majestic architecture, the

Capitol appears as a sort of utopia. This lavishness serves a dual purpose; it distracts the Capitol's citizens from the underlying cruelty of the regime and simultaneously reinforces the power disparity between the Capitol and the districts. The bizarre and often grotesque fashion choices, body modifications, and hedonistic behaviors of the Capitol's residents highlight the cultural alienation between the Capitol and the districts. To the district's people, the Capitol's citizens appear almost inhuman, embodying the ugly consequences of extreme power and wealth. As Katniss wonders, "What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment?" (Collins, 2009, p. 64). By showcasing the Capitol's extravagant lifestyle, Snow creates an aspirational vision that keeps the Capitol's residents complacent and loyal, serving as a constant reminder of the inequality and injustice the districts suffer, which fuels their anger and hatred.

The spectacle of the districts is the complete opposite of the Capitol. The inhabitants of the districts live in terrible conditions; they face economic exploitation and limited basic resources like food, clean water, and medical supplies. Their working environment is extremely dangerous and they lack proper infrastructure due to constant neglect. However, none of this impoverished, wretched, and distressing situation of the districts is shown to the citizens of the Capitol. Instead, the dwellers of the districts are introduced as tributes of the annual Hunger Games.

The media event of Hunger Games is the biggest example of Snow's fascist regime establishing a connection between aesthetics and politics to continue its grip on power. As Wright (2012) states, "In The Hunger Games trilogy, the Games themselves structure the affective capacities of the citizens of Panem...the goal of the Hunger Games as they play out in the first two novels is to cultivate a public that is emotionally invested in the power of the Capitol" (p. 99). The game itself becomes a televised spectacle that mediates the relationship between the districts and the Capitol.

Through the event of The Hunger Games, President Snow transforms violence into entertainment. As Walter (2007) proclaims, "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war" (p. 19), and "The games, in which children from this brave new world are forced to kill one another, function as miniaturized wars, held in times of peace, as a macabre and brutal sabre rattling reminder of the power of the government and the devastating outcome of past attempts to challenge it" (Muller, 2012, p. 51). By turning the games into a glamorous event, complete with elaborate costumes, dramatic narratives, and public celebrations, Snow hides the brutality that they represent.

The build-up to the games is highly beautified and glorified. As Katniss remarks, "The Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others" (p. 19). From the reaping day to the parade and then the interviews, the tributes are stylized to such an extent that they become an object of fascination for Capitol's inhabitants, much like Edward Said's exotic other. As Cinna says to Katniss, "You see, Portia and I think that coal miner thing's very overdone. No one will remember you in that. And we both see it as our job to make the District Twelve tributes unforgettable" (p. 66). From this, we can see how the tributes are treated and viewed as fashion statements designed to impress the masses and not as captured animals on their way to the slaughterhouse.

The aesthetic presentation of the games, by making violence appetizing and enjoyable for the viewers, serves three main purposes. Firstly, they desensitize the Capitol audience to the real suffering of the tributes as they are shown as less than human. The violence is framed in a way that strips it of its horror and normalizes it as part of the cultural fabric, detaching the Capitol citizens from the moral implications of the event. As Benjamin (2007) explains:

> The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses. Today it does so in the film. (pp. 18-19)

The citizens of Capitol are Benjamin's distracted people, and The Hunger Games is the aesthetic film that keeps them engaged and entertained, subtly shaping their perceptions and habits. As Wright (2012)

explains, "The media event in The Hunger Games trilogy becomes a site of aesthetic engagement. More than a series of happenings or a raw feed of unedited footage, the live broadcast is highly constructed in order to evoke particular responses from the public" (p. 101). By normalizing his atrocities, Snow's regime keeps the Capitol dwellers in a state of passive acceptance, unable to question the underlying political and social injustices as their critical faculties are dulled by the continual spectacle and distraction provided by the Games.

The second use of the aesthetic is that *The Hunger Games* serves as a reminder of the Capitol's absolute power over the districts and a form of punishment for the districts following their defeat in the first rebellion. As Wright (2012) puts it, "Before each reaping, the story of the failed rebellion and creation of the Games acts as both a warning for everyone forced to participate and an unyielding demonstration of the Capitol's dominance over the entire population" (p. 99). The games instill fear and act as a warning never to attempt rebellion again.

Simultaneously, the event gives a false illusion of victory to the districts. The Games create a sense of heroism and honor around the tributes; winners are celebrated as heroes, and their violent acts are glorified as courageous. While they do receive wealth and fame for winning the show, it comes at a personal cost, like acting on the murder instinct to survive, seeing the death of peers, and experiencing lifelong psychological trauma. The victors are paraded as symbols of the Capitol's benevolence and are nothing more than pawns in Snow's propaganda machine.

These tributes and victors also provide a momentary and superficial sense of pride for their districts. Their triumph temporarily satisfies the districts' yearning to challenge the Capitol, creating an illusion that they have achieved victory through their representatives. Manipulative statements like "Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!" (p. 22) are used to perpetuate the idea that the Games offer a fair chance at conquest and a better life when in reality, they are planned and controlled by the game makers. The celebration of a victor gives the districts a false sense of accomplishment, pacifying their desires for genuine change as they experience rebellion through their tributes. This illusion of victory distracts them from the need for collective action against the Capitol's tyranny.

This leads us to the third political objective that Snow achieves through these aesthetic games. The Hunger Games ensures that the districts are not only divided but also see each other as enemies. They become so hyper-fixated on winning the games, especially the first four districts that train their children for this prestigious event, that they forget the harsh realities of their oppression. As Benjamin (2007) states, "[Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic" (p. 20). Consequently, the districts, by enjoying the loss and destruction of other districts, play a huge role in maintaining Snow's totalitarian rule.

Apart from the games, President Snow uses other methods to maintain the distance between the districts. A clear hierarchy exists among the districts, with District 1 being the Capitol's favorite and District 12 suffering the most mistreatment. Snow involves aesthetics to justify this hierarchy. For example, District 1 makes luxury items for the Capitol; they deal with expensive and beautiful gems like diamonds. District 12, on the other hand, mines coal. There is a clear aesthetic disparity between diamonds and coal that reinforces the systemic oppression and maintains the hierarchical structure that benefits only President Snow and the people of the Capitol. Through this, we can see how aesthetics is a powerful propaganda tool. We can also see how Snow's aestheticization of politics adds to the sense of dystopia in the novel. It helps Snow play god and render the subjugated completely helpless.

While Benjamin (2007) highlighted how fascist regimes aestheticized politics for their advantage, he also believed that "politicizing art" (p. 20) could counter these authoritarian tactics and serve as a powerful source of rebellion and liberation for the oppressed. In *The Hunger Games*, we see how Katniss Everdeen, Peeta Mellark, and others from districts politicize aesthetics to resist and challenge the hegemonic power structures.

One of the primary means through which they appropriate aesthetics is by subverting the spectacle orchestrated by Snow in their own favour. Debord (1983) believes that if working-class consumers can recognize the extent to which they are trapped and isolated by the spectacle, the closer society will come closer to overthrowing the spectacle (p. 69). Both

Katniss and Peeta recognize that they are being turned into spectacles for the entertainment of the Capitol. They understand their role as pawns in the Capitol's grandiose display of power. This awareness of their objectification as spectacles drives them to destabilize the Capitol's control of them.

The most prominent example of spectacle subversion is the fake love story orchestrated by Peeta and Haymich. Peeta is conscious of the fact that their every move, emotion, and interaction is being viewed and manipulated by the game makers, but instead of letting them take the lead, he utilizes that to create a visual narrative of his own. He declares his love for Katniss in front of everyone, knowing that this will bring them positive attention. As Haymitch says to an angry Katniss who is unaware of this scheme, "That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own...He made you look desirable! You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!" (p. 134). The primary concern of the game makers is to put on an exciting show, and usually, this is done through ruthless killing, but Peeta replaces that spectacle with the tragic lovers' story. Later in the game, Katniss recognizes the power of their pretend love affair when she receives rewards funded by the audience for her actions, like kissing Peeta. Their on-screen romance not only makes Capitol dwellers root for them but also shatters the murderous appearance projected by the game makers, making them appear more human. So successful is their love angle that for the first time in the history of The Hunger Games, the game makers changed the rule of a single winner.

Later, when Katniss and Peeta are the last ones standing and technically the winners of the seventy-fifth Hunger Games, the game makers attempt to revoke the rule change, demonstrating their absolute control. However, Katniss challenges that by refusing to provide the Capitol with a winner. As she thinks, "They have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully, while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country. If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were" (p. 338). By being willing to eat the deadly berries on camera, presenting the illusion that she and Peeta possibly cannot live without each other, Katniss not only romanticizes death to make their love story more appealing but also defeats the gamemakers and Snow by using their own tactics against them.

Apart from this, Katniss also uses many other aesthetic and symbolic acts of defiance to resist the oppressive control of the Capitol. Katniss becomes the most significant spectacle of Panem and switches it to serve her intentions, reflecting Wright's (2012) claim that:

> She understands how the Games are constructed for a viewing audience because she has been part of that audience. Put another way, she recognizes the aesthetic value of the Hunger Games. Because the event occurs every year with the same basic structure, Katniss manipulates the Games in order to survive, incorporating the prior knowledge of the Games into her strategy as a tribute. (p. 102)

Her girl-on-fire aesthetic adds heavily to the resistance. Everyone is in awe of her after watching her play with fire, as she expresses, "No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire" (p. 70). Through this artistic costume, she signifies how the Capitol views the people from her district: as coal - hideous and static. However, they should be scared of coal when it catches fire, because fire is alive and dangerous, and once it spreads, it's hard to contain. Through her fiery image, she becomes a living symbol of defiance. Her manipulation of Capitol's aesthetics empowers her and sets her on a journey of rebellion.

Her Mockingjay pin is another visual expression of resistance. The Mockingjay is a species of bird created by the Capitol with the ability to mimic sounds produced by humans. Their original purpose was to eavesdrop on the rebels during the first rebellion. However, once the rebels discovered this, they started providing the birds with false information, sending them off with deceptive messages. The birds' very existence is a reminder of the Capitol's failure. Katniss continues to wear the pin regardless of President Snow's disapproval, turning it into a symbol of defiance. Later on in the trilogy, she becomes the symbol of Mockingjay, providing hope and promise that the fascist regime of Snow will fail.

The most powerful form of politicizing aesthetics in the novel is Rue's memorial. Rue is a twelve-year-old girl who becomes Katniss's ally in the arena. After a tribute kills her, Katniss decorates her body with

flowers to give her a proper memorial, followed by the three-finger gesture that means "thanks," "admiration," and "good-bye to someone you love" (p. 25). Through this act, Katniss humanizes Rue; she highlights her as a loss to mourn rather than another tribute who wasn't strong and violent enough to win.

The flowers arranged around Rue's body create a visual symbol of resistance. As Wright (2012) asserts:

> In this made-for-television moment, the tragedy of Rue's death (even though Katniss later finds out the scene is never broadcast in the way she intended) is made into something, well, beautiful. Katniss uses her knowledge of how the Games work to make a statement about their cruelty that is as aesthetically pleasing as it is politically relevant. (p. 103)

This image, when broadcast, resonated deeply with the viewers, especially those in the districts, who saw it as a silent protest against the Capitol's brutality and a call for solidarity and remembrance. Debord (1983) predicts that people will eventually use the very products that isolate them to band together and rebel against the spectacle that created them (p. 70).

This moment in the game kickstarts the rebellion in Rue's district when its inhabitants respond to Katniss's three-finger gesture. This initial spark of resistance gradually evolves into a full-blown rebellion that overthrows the totalitarian rule of President Snow, showcasing how the oppressed politicise aesthetics, using the same products that entrapped them, to gain liberation. Just like tyranny and persecution, resistance is a very dystopian concept, and politicizing of aesthetics enhances the dystopian landscape of the novel.

Conclusion

This research paper has demonstrated how aesthetics create tension between oppressive power and defiant resistance in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. It depicts how the Capitol's creation of spectacles and glamorization of violence plays a huge role in maintaining its dominance over Panem. Their policy of aestheticizing politics works as the strongest pillar upholding and strengthening their empire. Simultaneously, the study also demonstrates how the spectacle created by the Capitol is subverted as an act of rebellion by characters like Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. These characters politicize aesthetics to hijack the stage, oppressing them and using visual narratives to broadcast their resistance to the Capitol. This study is significant because it sheds light on how aesthetics influence power dynamics and contributes to the understanding of the dystopian world depicted in *Hunger Games*.

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Bodies as Crisis: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Dystopian Migration in Exit West by Mohsin Hamid

Wareesha Batool Qureshi Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, wareeshabatoolqureshi@gmail.com
Qurratulaen Liaqat Associate Professor, Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan,qurratulaen@fccollege.edu.pk

dystopian migration, surveillance, power, violence, discourse, Exit West, Foucault

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how migrant bodies become sites of crisis within contemporary migration narratives. It analyses the intersections of power, surveillance, and violence in a postcolonial, globalized context, applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to Mohsin Hamid's Exit West. The study explores how disciplinary power regulates and normalizes migrants through mechanisms of control, including surveillance and the panoptic gaze imposed by host nations. Focusing on key themes such as border crossings, refugee camps, and displacement, the paper highlights the marginalization and objectification of migrant bodies through Foucault's theory of power. It argues that modern global systems perpetuate new forms of domination and control, shaping migrants' experiences of vulnerability and identity. Ultimately, the analysis reveals how structural violence and global governance transform migration into a dystopian condition of crisis.

Introduction

The concept of "migration" has become the most significant subject in all works of literature as it is the main element of socio-political structures of modern societies. In the contemporary world, migration is an interaction between individual ambitions and social forces. Many migrants leave their home countries for better lifestyles and economic opportunities. They are often driven by poverty, unemployment and economic inequality. However, Migrants, especially from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), are subjected to unique forms of prejudice and violence. They encounter racism and Islamophobia, which both result in violent acts. As one of the study reports, "The majority of those [migrants] who have fled the violence are in a dramatically worse situation than before their displacement, often having brought few possessions with them and finding themselves in extreme dependency" (Rother et al., 2016, p.13). This demonstrates that violence becomes a control mechanism and an instruments of power that frequently leave migrants with few options. This means that the violence, surveillance and power over migrants reveal new forms of dystopian authoritative strategies and policies of the host countries.

In 1868, J. S. Mills used the term 'dystopia' to make a difference between it and utopia. He uttered this word about the corrupt property policy of the Irish government during his political speech. Keeping his point of view, the Oxford English Dictionary describes dystopia as "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible" (2023). The dystopian literary genre captivates readers because of its "tremendous transformation in the twenty-first century" (202, p.77). This transformation deeply engages with the multifaceted socio-political problems that govern contemporary society. This research focuses on the dystopian migration in the twenty-first century. In "A Dystopian Vision of the Refugee Crisis", Genova tells the harsh realities of border control. Migrants leave their homeland and settle into controlled places where "life in [the] refugee camps can be just as hellish and dehumanizing" (2017). The refugee camps are surrounded by cameras, which act as 'surveillance' over refugees (Genova, 2017). This raises the question of the privacy of migrants. This means that migrants will lose their human rights if they leave their nation. Mohsin Hamid is a contemporary Pakistani Anglophone writer. His novel, *Exit West*, is an emotional exploration of the dystopian condition of humans within the context of migration. This work addresses themes of dislocation and socio-political issues in today's world. In the narrative, the condition of migrants serves as a critical issue for analyzing violence, authority, and discipline of host countries.

This research illustrates that seemingly utopian

countries become dystopian places for migrants. This means that the opportunities migrants want to access in host countries become their unfulfilled desires. Their bodies are woven into the intricate web of global power structures as crises. So, Foucault's concepts of surveillance, power dynamics, and violence offer an inclusive framework to analyze the power structures of authoritative host countries over migrants. Foucault argues that power is not confined to specific institutions but operates at multiple levels. It is dispersed throughout various social structures. In an interview, "What our Present Is", Foucault states that power is "the exercise of something ... one can govern a person ... one can determine one's behavior in terms of a strategy by resorting to a number of tactics" (Lotringer, 1961, p.410). He claims that modern societies employ disciplinary mechanisms through institutions like prisons, schools, and hospitals to regulate individuals by shaping their behavior. He also examines the techniques employed by institutional mechanisms in governing populations. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault argues that surveillance is a tool of subjugation and a persistent force that affects individual behavior and societal norms (2012, p. 217). He elucidates the role of surveillance and governance in modern societies. He asserts that violence is not only limited to physical harm but also includes psychological effects. In the context of dystopian migration, the violence migrants endure in the host countries causes their psychological disturbance. For instance, the continual governance and control of authoritative states over migrants make them docile bodies. They consider themselves slaves to the commanding countries, which causes a migration crisis. They start behaving according to the demands of these countries because they are under their surveillance. This research paper argues that *Exit West* portrays surveillance as an omnipresent force which shapes the experiences of migrants. This paper aims to explore how the bodies of migrants become sites of constant inspection due to the persistence of power structures.

This research aims to analyze how violence against migrant bodies is discursively constructed as a power mechanism in *Exit West*. It reveals that host countries are in power and migrants are powerless. This powerlessness to manage their lives makes the host countries dystopian sites for them. Furthermore, the study explores the long-term effects of systemic violence and control on the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of migrants. Lastly, it examines how characters resist, challenge, or negotiate these oppressive structures within the narrative. The study sheds light on human agency and resilience in the face of intensive subjugation. Through this multidimensional analysis, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on dystopian migration, power, and human vulnerability in contemporary global contexts.

The methodology of this paper is a qualitative approach. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is being read and analyzed in-depth as a primary source. My work interprets the author's depiction of violence, power dynamics, and migration within the narrative. It is inclined by Michel Foucault's postcolonial theory on power, violence, and governmentality. Through Foucauldian discourse analysis, it explores the experiences of migrants, demonstrating societal pressures and power structures. Using this theoretical framework, it analyses the novel and delves more deeply into its themes. The secondary sources include books, journals, articles, and other research works around the same topic. To understand Foucauldian discourse analysis, it is essential to grasp the concept of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis refers to both "a theory of language use" and "a method for analyzing language in use" (Griffin, 2013, p.95). Discourse provides the "(re)production of power relations in society" along with "the interpretative schema operating within the society" (Griffin, 2013, p. 98). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault argues that discourses are the systems of knowledge and practices that determine how one views the world and how he/she behave in society (1972, p. 96). He explains how authoritative bodies shape discourse and knowledge "with the establishment of power relations" (1972, p. 45) to impose power. In *Subject and Power*, Foucault claims that the knowledge of power must be "the total structure of actions brought to bear" (1982, p.220) on the actions of others and the evasions challenged by those actions. Foucault also argues that power in medieval society was consolidated primarily through the exertion of sovereign authority, which maintained complete control over subjects through violence. Power, violence, and migration all come together in *Exit West*, which Hamid expertly creates through comprehensive language. Hamid focuses on civil war, relocation,

personal identification, and the destruction caused by power relations. Foucault accentuates the role of discourse in shaping power structures. In the novel, migration issues play a significant role in shaping power dynamics. The narrative manipulates an interplay of power dynamics, such as the supremacy of individuals over others or even one political section over another.

Theoretical Framework

Hannah Arendt defines violence as "distinct from power, force, or strength - always needs implements" (1970, p. 4). Indeed, the practice of violence can be acceptable under certain conditions, for instance, to defend the public from external threats (Arendt, 1970, p. 51). However, the power to communally practice violence "kept in existence by the [...] means of promise and covenant" (Arendt, 1970, p. 176). Sorel also proclaims, "the role of violence in history appears singularly great... as to awaken them [i.e. the middle class] to a sense of their own class sentiment" (2004, p. 90). On the other hand, Foucault describes violence as bodily harm: "A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities" (1982, p. 789). Instead, power is the capacity to influence the behaviors or intentions of other agents. Contrary to violence, power only disturbs those who act at liberty because they "are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Both Foucault and Arendt identify a significant connection between freedom and power.

Foucault elucidates in *The Subject and Power* that power is "a mode of action...an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future" (1982, p. 789). It exists only "when it is put into action" (Foucault, 1982, p. 788). In the article "A Foucauldian Reading of the Global Compact for Migration" (2021), Casasampera claims that Foucault does not view power as a centralised entity exercised by elites, but rather as a force that permeates all levels of society and manifests in various institutional and discursive forms. Additionally, the term 'governmentality' refers to a mode of study that emphasises the strategies and information that support efforts to influence individual and social behaviour in many contexts (Walters, 2012, p.30). To govern is 'to structure the possible fields of action' through a multifaceted collaboration of institutions, methods, investigations and reflections, strategies and calculations (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). It is called "the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). It is essentially connected to the "exercise of power–power as governmentality, or governmentality as the exercise of power" (Casasampera, 2012, p. 2). Though this is only a destructive power. To comprehend the" governmentality as a conduct of conduct", as the action of "(self) conducting an individual's behavior and relationality", highlights the intrinsic possibility of "resistance or counter-conduct" (Foucault, 2009, p. 195). This complicates the question of control. The spatial dimensions of power are described by Willaert's definition of governmentality. This term refers to both the ensemble of practices and schemes of power exercised over the population and the preeminence of a conceptualization of power as the government of the population (Willaert, 2013, p. 151). This study employs Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the novel Exit West, deconstructing the discursive forms surrounding violence against migrants.

Existing studies have analyzed *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid through different lenses. According to Aroosa Kanwal, post-9/11 fiction disregards social variances and regiments the Muslims worldwide. She deliberates beyond 9/11 because the tense relationship between Islam and the West redefines home and identity and shapes Muslim identity among the diaspora. She links the post-9/11 expression with stereotypes of Muslims, Islam, and Pakistan as an epicentre of terrorism. A "shift from orientalist epistemology to terrorist ontology" (Kanwal, 2015, p. 3) occurred when the US and the West decided to target Muslims instead of Blacks or Easterners. Kakutani Michiko asserts that due to the stereotypical portrayal in the novel as "others" or security risks, "with political crises, warp-speed technological changes, [which] grow tensions between nativists and migrants threatening to upend millions of lives" (Michiko, 2017). Sukhdev Sandhu claims that the use of doors as portals represents migration's defiance against entrenched power relations as migrants "having been fresh transplanted to tough new terrains" (Sandhu, 2018). This also reflects the role of the state in sustaining racism and xenophobia through its laws and practices.

In the article "Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation: Refugees in Hamid's *Exit West*," Michael Perfect notes that *Exit West* was published following the announcement of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report that noted the number of migrants had peaked in 2014. This novel reflects both the political upheavals and the tragic experiences of refugees. The displacement of refugees symbolizes mobility across historical periods (Perfect 2019, p. 1). The refugees are described as a sizable crowd whose identities are hazy. The syntax of the narration demonstrates subordination because refugees are always defined in the subordinate clause (Perfect 2019, p. 4). Because they are denied access to their own country, people are forced to question the concept of nationality and lose their rights and refuge. The novel also captures the key political and social challenges, as well as the individualistic fight for "fulfilment, space, and self against the odds" (Shamsie, 2017). So, the world Hamid depicts is a dystopian and near-future society.

Sophie Gilbert notes, "*Exit West* is a story about how familiar and persistent human existence is, even at the edge of dystopia" (2017). The novel echoes the core themes of societal breakdown and disillusionment by depicting a world of bloodshed and displacement, as it "maps the breakdown of a society, and how effortlessly the cycle begins to repeat itself" (Gilbert, 2017). The novel creates a dangerous and uncertain dystopian world through the eyes of its protagonists, Saeed and Nadia. The novel demonstrates the dilemma of refugees to illustrate the dystopian idea, and "paradoxical—the physical journey from one land to another is, for most refugees, the most dangerous and traumatic part" (Gilbert, 2017). In the novel, the mystical doors serve as symbols of authority, representing the spatial control mechanisms. These doors "add a sense of magical realism" (Gilbert, 2017) and subvert the established order of space, posing a challenge to governmental power and border control systems. Lastly, this literature review has examined how existing studies overlook the fact that Foucauldian discourse analysis can be employed to deconstruct the representation of dystopian migration in *Exit West*. By engaging with this theoretical framework, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how language influences the discussion of violence and power in relation to migrants. This research examines *Exit West* from the angle of migrants' subjectivity, particularly in connection to Foucault's concept of governmentality, power structures, surveillance, and violence.

Discussion

The dystopian migration discourse is one of the current issues being discussed in literature because of its multiculturalism and racism. Today, the migrants are considered as colonists and the host countries are as colonialists. This colonialism causes the migrants to suffer an identity crisis, racial disharmony and global violence. These critical issues make the migrants' journey dystopian. This research paper argues that *Exit West* is a dystopian narrative that explores the transformation of migrant subjectivity. The novel revolves around the migrants who migrate from one country to another through magical doors. When the protagonists of the novel, Nadia and Saeed, learn about these doors, they want to cross the borders because of the government's fights and curfews in their country. These doors offer them an escape from the national conflicts but "mock the desires of those who desired to go far away" (Hamid, 2017, p. 52). The migrants are drawn to the appealing opportunities and dream of better lives. However, Hamid speaks up about the reality of traditional migration by calling migrants' dreams "dreams of fools" (Hamid, 2017, p. 52). Here, the author ironically tells the dangers behind these doors. He urges readers to consider the cruelties of crossing the border. This research paper argues that these magical doors initially captivate migrants, but then trap them within the power network of host countries. In "Subject and Power", Foucault states that power is exercised over "free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (p. 790). This means these subjects are no longer free and become docile bodies when trapped in a control mechanism. Similarly, migrants themselves are entangled in the power structures of host countries when crossing borders. As a result, they are no longer free and are subject to the power dynamics of host countries. This condition causes the transformation of the migrant's self and subjectivity in the 21st century.

The word 'subjectivity' was used in 1803 in the Edinburgh Review. This term means "the quality, state, or nature of being" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025). It highlights the well-being of an individual

in society. In the context of dystopian migration discourse, the term explains the conditions of migrants in the controlling places. The places mentioned in the *Exit West* uphold a systematic process of control and dehumanization that migrants lose their sense of self and are subjectified under persistent physical and psychological domination through media, the military, and language. The migrants have "witnessed massacres in the streets, militant shooting unarmed people and then disappearing" (Hamid, 2017, p. 64). Hamid uses the words 'unarmed people' instead of 'migrants'. This means that migrants, as unarmed people, are powerless, and the military is in power as it has weapons. Here, the word 'unarmed' is an icon of colonial power. Additionally, migrants are desperate to migrate. The "fear" in their eyes is to know that "they would be trapped here forever" (Hamid, 2017, p. 77). In the light of Foucault's point of view, it is the "fear of punishment" (1977, p. 238). The migrants know that if they do anything without the consent of the host country, they will be punished. Due to this, their "manners and ways and habits were undergoing considerable change" (Hamid, 2017, p. 117). This demonstrates that migrants undergo significant changes in their activities due to the influence of authoritative places.

This study also argues that the places mentioned in *Exit West* are crucial to understanding their purposes as they remind both of terror and supremacy. Flynn claims that the contemporary era is "the epoch of space". In Foucauldian discourse analysis, heterotopias are a "constant of every human group and include spaces like 'spaces' of colonies" (Flynn, 2018, p. 169). The landscapes in *Exit West*, such as the unnamed city, Mykonos, London, and Marin, illustrate the "geopolitics of the region" (Flynn, 2018, p. 170) to understand the hegemonic structures of colonial power. Foucault also asserts that to exercise power through government "is to structure the possible fields of action of other people" (1982, p. 790). In "Governmentality", Foucault describes governmentality as "the conduct of conduct" or "the art of government" (1991, p. 220-1), where "government" refers to a broad spectrum of methods of control that make subjects governable. Similarly, every military group, native power, and governmental power seems to suppress the migrants in the colonial places mentioned in the novel. Political power is the formal way of controlling others for political gains. The state's efforts to govern movement and maintain order reflect its power and governmentality, which involve the management of life and the regulation of populations. Supremacies for the sake of political control make migrants victims measly. When extremists seize the stock exchange in an *unnamed city*, the government responds with countermeasures that have catastrophic effects, disrupting peaceful activities. The people are "deprived of the portals" and feel "marooned and alone and much more afraid" because the government decides on anti-terrorism measures that "Internet connectivity [is] suspended" (Hamid, 2017, p. 37). Through the constant bloodshed, severe bombs and curfews, "authorities perhaps wishing to signal that they were in such complete control" (Hamid, 2017, p. 29), protagonists eventually decide to leave their worn-torn country, as being "at the edge of the abyss" (Hamid, 2017, p. 7). *Political power structures* play a significant role in impacting the choices and lives of the characters. The protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, must find a way out of their oppressive home nation and find a place to live without worrying about danger. To escape the country's death trap, Nadia and Saeed are driven to investigate the mysterious doors.

Foucault's theory of 'the conduct of conduct' becomes intense when the migrants modify their behaviour to obey the conventions and laws. On the *Greek island of Mykonos*, they face the challenge of learning the "languages of the world" (Hamid, 2017, p. 62), understanding cultural norms, and following different sets of rules. This means that migrants do not live according to their choices but according to the instructions and regulations of host countries. They encounter social dynamics and hierarchies as they travel through different places, including problems with class, race, and religion. These *social power structures* demonstrate how the migrants are received and treated in different landscapes. Everywhere they face oppression and difficulties "with no food... with moments of tension, with tension ebbing and flowing...electricity went out, ... murders and rapes and assaults as well" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 78-85). By presenting their ability to manage the "electricity network", which is "cut off by the authorities" (Hamid, 2017, p. 83), the dominant class metaphorically holds power away from a vulnerable group through these power outages in *Dark London*. In dystopian London, the governing groups treat migrants

as subjects, not permitting them to settle down anywhere in the city. Due to this, Hamid satirically calls London '*Dark London'* because of its inability to treat the migrants as human beings.

This research paper also argues that power is exercised differently in the contemporary era. It is constantly exercised through *digital surveillance* today. Intensifying surveillance of migrants raises important questions about human rights, privacy, and the potential influence on their well-being and ability to integrate into host countries. An important surveillance theorist defines surveillance as "the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction" (Lyon, 2007, p. 14). However, Haggerty and Ericson state that surveillance is "the collection and analysis of information about populations to govern their activities" (2000, p.3). Although surveillance is an ancient social method, it has become a primary governing exercise of late modernism over the last forty years (Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon 2012, p. 4). *Panopticon* is a prison design in which prisoners can be observed at any time without knowing when they are being watched, and it "presents a cruel, ingenious cage" (Foucault, 1977, p. 205). The depiction of border control through surveillance in *Exit West* echoes Foucault's concept of the Panopticon.

Surveillance cameras are prevalent in the novel, especially in areas where migrants are congregated, such as refugee camps and border crossings. This research argues that authoritative host countries employ drone cameras as tools of control to monitor migrants and limit their freedom of movement. These drones serve as symbols of surveillance and the impact of modern technology on the lives of the migrants. Because of the power dynamics in the borderlands, the migrants are constantly feeling fidgety for "terror and thought that anything could happen" (Hamid, 2017, p. 64) and fear of being detected. Foucault notes that the panopticon is "the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly ... a perfect eye that nothing would escape" (1977, p. 173). Lyon also states that we cannot escape from the Panopticon, either historically, or scrutiny of surveillance in today's world (2006, p. 4). Similarly, these drone cameras serve as surveillance machines that brutally record by demonstrating the degradation of migrants in London. The migrants are constantly watched, "On a security camera, the family could be seen... picked up again by a second camera" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 54, 55), revealing the power dynamics in their lives. The powerful authorities of the host country track the family by camera. In London, "as drones and helicopters and surveillance balloons prowled intermittently overhead" (Hamid, 2017, p. 86), and in Marin, a tiny drone that keeps an eye on them, "not larger than a hummingbird", is designed to be unremarkable in their lives. The constant surveillance is seen to act as a control mechanism.

This research also argues that surveillance creates a persistent feeling of vulnerability and self-surveillance in migrants. As the power mechanism of surveillance applies to the body and its actions within a disciplinary framework (Foucault, 1977, p. 11). However, when it comes to the individualized body, surveillance functions more wisely as a technology of power. It is well said that today's camera surveillance highlights that some are watching others' behavior, which decreases the chances of cheating and increases social acceptance (Jansen et al., 2018, p. 4). It is effective due to an ever-increasing practice of 'watching and being watched' channels done by several latest ICT technologies. Therefore, the fear of being watched can be profoundly traumatic for those who feel they are under scrutiny. The migrants modify their behavior, speech, and dealings with others, "careful to keep their distance" (Hamid, 2017, p. 66), knowing their activities are being examined. This adaptation is a survival strategy in a violent and controlled society.

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization in WRVH as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (Rutherford et al., 2007). While Oksala understands violence as "intentional bodily harm" (2012, p. 9). For Foucault, power can and often does include the use of violence, as he points out that power relations do not "exclude the use of violence any more than it does the obtaining of consent; no doubt the exercise of power can never do without one or the other, often both at the same time" (1982, p. 789). According to Foucault, power is not incompatible with violence; on the contrary, it frequently entails it. This research argues that shootings, gunfights, and massacres are used as tools of control and punishment in *Exit West*. They

help to establish supremacy and reinforce the power of those imposing the violence. The novel begins in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees" (Hamid, 2017, p. 7) on the edge of civil war, and the city has yet to experience "any major fighting, just some shootings, and bombing" (Hamid, 2017, p. 7). The state exerts control over the population, and this control includes not only physical violence but also the manipulation of migrants' lives, highlighting the aspects of biopolitical power. As Foucault argues, "the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks" (Foucault, 1980, p. 122). The migration of protagonists is a response to the threat imposed by state violence. It also demonstrates how the actions of the state have a significant influence on individuals' lives, compelling them to engage in activities that are often challenging.

This research paper also argues that the manifestations of physical violence highlight the dominant themes of power, control, and the bitter realities faced by migrants in different landscapes. Shootings in Mykonos, "when bullets are fired into an unarmed mass of people" (Hamid, 2017, p. 66), represent the ultimate display of authority and power, with individuals armed with weapons having the ability to take a life. The violence they face in their homeland is a driving force behind their need to seek safety elsewhere. The governments and armed groups contribute to the displacement of individuals. This highlights that violence becomes a catalyst for migration and how governments indirectly shape the movements of their citizens through such means. The migrants are "referred to as mousetraps" (Hamid, 2017, p. 68), confronted with the threat of gunfire and bloodshed. In the light of Foucault's point of view, these scenes demonstrate the historical violence where criminals must be "subjected to physical pain" (1977, p. 105). Because of the illegal migration, migrants are presented as criminals. So, Hamid uses these magical doors as metaphors for illegal migration, which allows the migrants to cross borders. He tells about the threats of illegal migration through the use of fictional doors.

This research also argues that violence is employed to create social divisions within the communities of migrants and nativists. For example, the conflict in an unnamed city leads to the emergence of sectarian violence and divisions based on religious boundaries. This not only highlights how violence can be used as a tool of governmentality but also its role in shaping societal structures. In London, natives are in power when the "street was under attack by nativist mob ... with irons bars or knives" (Hamid, 2017, p. 79). Migrants as powerless subjects suffer physical violence when the "eye was bruised... lip was split and kept bleeding... three lives were lost" (Hamid, 2017, p. 79). However, in Marin, the migrants experience silent domination, non-interfering, pleasing the scene of the sea. The atmosphere varies from the landscapes in the novel because it supports the influx of refugees, as "Marin was less violent than most of the places" (Hamid, 2017, p. 112). These incidents show how migrants are treated by varying degrees of acceptance or rejection in different host countries.

Conflicts are characteristics of the broader discourse of violence. The research also states that migrants deal with both external conflicts and internal conflicts. For instance, Nadia with "her animal form, ... losing her balance, or possibly her mind" (Hamid, 2017, p. 91) due to the scene of wholesale slaughter advocated by nativists in London. This shows that migrants' mental health is disturbed due to depression and paranoia. They feel a constant sense of being under violence, impacting their physical well-being. On the other side, Saeed receives the news of his father's death, and he does not know "how to mourn, how to express his remorse, from so great a distance" (Hamid, 2017, p. 100). These scenes demonstrate that protagonists are deeply affected by the scattering of their 'extended family", "friends and acquaintances... the loss of a home" (Hamid, 2017, p. 56). Deprived of a home, migrants lose their privileges and shelters, and family affection. These circumstances raise questions about their nationality. The negotiation of self in different locations illustrates the influence of power structures on how migrants perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. These doors also serve as portals to alternative spaces, disturbing the conventional ideologies of borders and challenging established power structures. The doors become sites of resistance and revolution for migrants.

Exit West emphasizes individual agency despite the prevalent impact of external power structures. By demonstrating a kind of resistance against authorities,

Nadia and Saeed's decisions reveal their desire for independence and control over their lives. As Foucault claims, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). It means that resistance is directly proportional to power relations. In this context, resistance shows that migrants express their will, challenging the idea of submissiveness and compliance. In *Exit West*, the government crushes the militants' resistance, and the ensuing civil war highlights the ideological collisions between different social groups and the Islamic state. In the novel, Nadia is "single" and rejects the norms of society, including family, religion, and customs. She has doubts about the religious fervor with which she was raised. Riding a motorcycle, having a job at an insurance company and hanging out with Saeed at cafes and her apartment while using weed all constitute acts of defiance against Islamic religious society. Change is "exciting to her", and she enjoys deconstructive Islamic customs for always trusting "her instincts about situations" (Hamid, 2017, p. 17). There are distinctions in how Nadia and Saeed show resistance. Nadia fights back against the Islamic rhetoric she has been raised with, while Saeed resists the cultural practices of foreigners.

This research also argues that resistance is not always efficacious as migrants encounter penalties for their actions. As Foucault claims, "Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Power is unlimited and omnipresent. This *omnipresence of power* is prevalent in the novel, where power is not always easily toppled, and resistance meets with even more control and violence. Migrants encounter systems of power that control their movement, monitor their actions, and impose submission. The efficacy of resistance can be curtailed by the vigorous response from powerful authorities. For instance, migrants are "monkeys ... have lost respect for what they are born of" (Hamid, 2017, p. 82), and they are always "in a state of siege, and liable to be attacked by government at any time" (Hamid, 2017, p. 87). This depiction of resistance as encountering more control and violence shows power structures and the consequences of challenging conventional authority.

Conclusion

The subjective state of migrants is being changed during their migration journey. This study elucidates the intricate interaction between surveillance, physical violence, and resistance in the experiences of migrants in *Exit West*. It has analyzed the long-lasting influence of power structures and control mechanisms on the migrants' lives in the dystopian host countries. The illustrations of physical violence, such as beatings, shootings, and fights, serve as methods of dominance to maintain the existing power relations. Those in positions of power utilize violence as a means to uphold their control and suppress migrant's resistance. The migrants' lives are shaped not only by the severe physical violence but also by the enduring trauma and psychological impacts. The migrants resist the power dynamics but face more control and violence. They confront the restrictions of their ability to act freely in their dystopian migration journey. This reveals that the monitoring and antagonism of authoritative states influence the constant struggle for freedom. This condition highlights that migrants are striving to find a place to call their home in the 21st century.

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Bricolage of a Concubine Society: Resisting a Colonial Order in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Muhammad Hamza Ashfaq Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, hamzaashfaq775@gmail.com
Haider Ihsan Dawar Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, haiderihsan738@gamil.com

discourse, ideology, resistance, imagined community, The Handmaid's Tale

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tension between two competing discourses in Margaret Atwood's T*he Handmaid's Tale*: the dominant ideology upheld by the state and the counter-discourse articulated by the handmaids. The official discourse constructs a covertly colonized community in which individuals are confined to strictly defined roles and spaces. Focusing on the role of religious authority as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses, the paper examines how the theocratic system of Gilead perpetuates control and submission. At the same time, it investigates how the handmaids resist this oppressive order by forming an imagined community grounded in shared suffering, memory, and covert communication. The analysis draws on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, and Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to interpret how power and resistance operate within Gilead's social hierarchy. Employing close textual analysis within a qualitative framework, this study demonstrates how language, ritual, and collective identity serve as both tools of domination and subversion in Atwood's dystopian narrative.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a seminal work of dystopian fiction centred around a country controlled by a theocratic totalitarian regime. Set in the Republic of Gilead, the novel depicts a world where women are colonized, devoid of their personal freedom and used as machines of reproduction. Focusing on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood, this research paper examines the way the Gilead regime uses ideological and repressive state apparatuses to create and interpellate a state-fostered discourse, which is used to manipulate and colonize the fertile women, both mentally and physically, making them concubines who are bound to serve the nation by increasing its population. Margaret Atwood's narrative zooms in on the dystopian society pillared on the misinterpretation of religious scripts leading to the formation of a theocratic totalitarian state, a regime that exerts total control over women's bodies and lives and depicts a society characterized by extreme oppression and loss of personal freedoms, yet it also reveals glimpses of resistance and hope. This paper employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on close textual analysis as a research method, and utilises a mixed theoretical framework that draws on Foucault's concept of discourse, Althusser's ideology, and Anderson's concept of imagined communities to examine the hidden utopian elements within the dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This paper revolves around the fact that "dystopia is the opposite of utopia and is typically characterized by dehumanization" (Claeys, 2017, p.4), but within each utopia, there is a concealed dystopia, and within each dystopia, there is a hidden utopia. Atwood, in her work *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, explains that dystopias are not merely works of science fiction but extrapolations from current trends and conditions. They imagine societies where these trends have continued to their logical and often horrifying conclusions. The novel picks up chunks of reality from different parts of world as she explains in her work that she would not put "anything that humankind has not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not have the tools" (Atwood, 2011, p. 88) and present it both as a mirror and a cautionary tale, exposing totalitarian, patriarchal and authoritarian practices existing in the society, warning against the erosion of fundamental rights of life through the manipulation of discourse and ideology.

Literature Review

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis since its publication, particularly in discussions

surrounding dystopian literature and feminist critique. Its examination of the topos of dystopia, including power, oppression, and resistance, has made it a rich text for academic analysis. Several scholars have examined *The Handmaid's Tale* within the broader context of dystopian literature. Derived from the Greek word "dus," meaning bad or difficult, and "topia," meaning place, dystopia translates to "bad place" (Claeys, 2017, p. 4). These narratives depict worlds where oppressive regimes, environmental disasters, or technological advancements result in bleak and nightmarish societies. Dystopias are characterized by totalitarian governments, rampant poverty, environmental degradation, and the loss of individual freedoms, often under the guise of maintaining order or achieving some misguided form of perfection. Gregory Claeys, in *Dystopia: A Natural History*, defines dystopias as fictional portrayals of deeply flawed societies, often marked by totalitarian control, widespread oppression, and lack of personal freedoms (Claeys, 2017). Tom Moylan, in his work, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, discusses dystopias as critical reflections on contemporary societal issues and potential future trends (Moylan, 2000). Dystopian fiction thus functions as a mirror, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about their own world.

Karen F. Stein states in her essay, "Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: Scheherazade in Dystopia," that the novel is narrated by a Scheherazade of the future, telling her story to save her life. Offred's narrative serves not only as a means of personal survival but also as an act of resistance against the totalitarian state. Stein highlights this by stating that "her narrative itself is a criminal act, performed in secret and lost for many years" (1996, p. 269). By narrating her experiences, Offred inscribes both her victimization and her resistance, turning her personal suffering into a powerful act of defiance. She describes the novel as "a provocative inquiry into the origins and meanings of narrative" (Stein, 1996, p. 269). This suggests that the novel not only tells a story but also reflects on the nature of storytelling itself. One of the key issues it explores is "the narrator's relation to her tale: the simultaneous fear and desire to narrate one's story, and the attempt to create a self through language" (1996, p. 269). Offred's fear of being discovered and punished for telling her story coexists with her deep-seated need to assert her identity and humanity through narration.

Mario Clarer, in his essay "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's '*The Handmaid's Tale*,'" examines the theme of literacy suppression within the novel. Klarer observes that "the banning of books and the ensuing 'orality' of the whole population" is a recurring motif in dystopian literature, including Atwood's work (Klarer, 1995, p.130). The shift from a literate to an oral society in a dystopian world serves as a method for the ruling regime to exercise power by limiting access to knowledge. Klarer's analysis resonates with Michel Foucault's theories on discourse and power, specifically that control over knowledge production and dissemination serves as a means of exercising power. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the prohibition of books and writing is a direct attack on personal autonomy and intellectual freedom, essential tools for resistance and self-expression. By enforcing orality, the regime not only controls information but also shapes the very means by which individuals can conceptualize and communicate their thoughts.

Hilde Staels, in her essay, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Resistance through Narrating," highlights the role of language in the governance of Gilead. She describes that the "governing discourse of the absolutist state" is an "artificial, so-called Biblical speech" (Staels, 1995, p. 457). This manipulation of religious scriptures legitimizes the regime's authority and moralizes its oppressive practices. By co-opting biblical language, the state empowers divine legitimacy, making resistance not only a political but also a spiritual defiance. The use of "Biblical speech" in Gilead is a clear example of how discourse can be created to sustain power structures. The false interpretation of religion is used to manipulate individuals' perceptions of morality and duty.

Valerie Oved Giovanini states in his essay, "An Army of Me: Representations of Intersubjective Relations, Ethics, and Political Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", that the series goes beyond critiquing patriarchal society by engaging with new concepts of subjectivity, morality, and political resistance. He says that it is evident through the character of Offred, whose identity experiences both fragmentation and empowerment through her empathic relationships with others. The first section of the article examines the show's cinematography, particularly how it portrays

trauma and defence mechanisms through the lens of Freud's ego psychology. In the second section, the article treats the show as an aesthetic object, exploring its impact on viewers' unconscious minds. The series opens new moral horizons, challenging and resisting patriarchal norms of self-sufficiency and individualism. This aspect is crucial as it reveals how the aesthetics of *The Handmaid's Tale* can evoke emotional responses and provoke critical reflections on personal and societal values. By presenting a dystopian reality that feels uncomfortably plausible and existent, the show encourages viewers to question and resist existing power structures and ideologies. The third section of the article connects the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* to contemporary US politics, primarily through the lens of hashtag movements like #MeToo. The show's aesthetics, especially the iconic handmaid's robes, have transcended the screen to become powerful symbols of protest against oppressive ideologies. The visual symbolism of the robes has been effectively employed in real-world protests, demonstrating the intersection of art and activism. The use of these symbols in protests highlights the show's significant cultural impact and its role in boosting political resistance.

The Handmaid's Tale is a classic dystopian text that has been extensively researched from various perspectives, including feminist critique, political allegory, and Foucauldian analysis of power and control. Scholars have explored the mechanisms of repression and surveillance in Gilead, drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and biopolitics. However, I have used Benedict Anderson's concept of "Imagined Communities" to explore the utopian elements within the nightmarish dystopia of Gilead, leading to the creation of a concubine society. Anderson's theory, as articulated in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, posits that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group, united by shared experiences, languages, and ideologies (Anderson 2006, pp. 5-6). This framework provides a fresh lens through which to understand the secret concubine networks of resistance within Gilead. These networks can be seen as imagined communities, where the shared desire for freedom and the collective memory of a pre-Gilead past unite individuals in their collective opposition to the regime. By focusing on these elements, this research fills a gap in the existing scholarship, highlighting the collective action and imagined solidarity as forms of resistance against totalitarian oppression. This approach not only broadens the scope of dystopian studies but also magnifies our understanding of how imagined communities can foster hope and resilience in times of dystopia.

The Dominant Discourse of Gilead

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopia where women are subjugated, oppressed, and dehumanized by the newly formed theocratic totalitarian state. In the novel, women's fertility rates are decreasing along with the country's population, so the fertile women are captured and forced into sexual servitude with the elite commanders of society. The so-called Handmaids are the state's dehumanized human machinery of reproduction; while the act of reproduction, of becoming a handmaid is justified through the manipulation of religious textures, especially by referring to the story of Jacob and Rachel.

In the novel, the democratic state of the US is overthrown by the theocratic totalitarian state which enforces a new kind of discourse to dominate, dehumanize and discipline the individuals of society. Michel Foucault, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, argues that discourse creates an epistemic reality and serves as a tool of control and discipline (2019). In the Republic of Gilead, discourse is created to legitimize the regime's totalitarian and patriarchal order. Foucault posits that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (1990, p. 101). He argues that discourse produces power by normalizing norms and truths, making them seem natural and unquestionable. In the novel, the aunts become the state subjects to normalize discourse by forcing handmaids to internalize it. Aunts preach the state's discourse to the handmaids that "there is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (Atwood, 1998, p. 24). The handmaids are forced to internalize that they have been given protection from the anarchic society, while their freedom has been subjugated. But the tactical use of words "freedom to" and "freedom from" makes the state's oppressive discourse quite natural

and unquestionable. Discourse has been framed upon stately motives, by which individuals are devoid of their autonomy and agency, transferring state control of their reins.

The theocratic totalitarian state, pillared on the false interpretations of religious scripts, positions the concubines as machines of reproduction, forcing them to internalize the identity of handmaids. Handmaids are exploited by the state's preaching of half-quoted religious verses like "Blessed are the meek" (Atwood, 1998, p.64). Handmaids are made subservient by making them internalize the truth generated by the state. A new ideology is constructed upon the religious discourse, which is used to control and discipline the handmaids' thoughts and behaviors. According to Louis Althusser (2008), ideology operates in such a way that it recruits subjects among individuals, transforming them into subjects through the process of interpellation. Interpellation is the process by which ideology is internalized and the identity is hailed in us through this process of internalization. Through the interpellation of a stately, fostered discourse, a censored society is created, where individuals must live within defined spaces and roles. All the fertile women in the society had been given the identity of handmaids and their previous names had been nullified by the state, leaving these dehumanized women to use the patronymic names "composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it" (Atwood, 1998, p. 306). Handmaids are dehumanized through this act of denaming, a characteristic topos of dystopian literature. The regime of Gilead forcibly gathers fertile women and shapes them into state subjects, whereby they are interpellated with the idea of procreating for the elite of society, or, to put it bluntly, for the capitalistic purposes of earning huge profits by selling and exporting their children, the priceless little beings.

The Republic of Gilead employs both Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses to enforce its ideology and establish disciplined control over society. Althusser posits that the intricate interplay between the Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses allows for subtle combinations of coercion and ideology to maintain societal control (2008). He explains that "the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function 'by ideology'" (Althusser, 2008, p. 78). Gilead uses religion as the most effective ideological state apparatus to brainwash and condition the handmaids as machines of reproduction, reproducing specifically for the interest of the state. Fertility of handmaids is considered a natural resource to be exported, which is normalized by writings that says "GOD IS A NATIONAL RESOURCE" (Atwood, 1998, p. 213). This phrase demonstrates how the regime manipulates handmaids to legitimize its control over reproductive functions, highlighting the state's exploitation of women's bodies for its political and economic ends. The state is involved in the most abominable of crimes: selling its humanity in return for materialistic pursuits of wealth. The regime of Gilead frames its policies not merely as legal but as sacred through a maintained discourse. The regime uses violence to discipline the handmaids, instilling a sense of fear through the display of bodies "hanging on the Wall". The Eyes, Angels, and Guardians all belong to the category of repressive state apparatuses, using violence to discipline and control society. These activities of repressive state apparatuses expose the state's monopoly on violence and the use of terror as a means of social control, which, too, is characteristic of dystopian literature.

Resilience: An Opposite Discourse

In the Republic of Gilead, the Handmaids' multiple acts of defiance generate an alternate discourse, challenging the oppressive regime of Gilead. Foucault says that "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1990, p. 101). This hindrance and point of resistance become the starting point for an opposing strategy among the handmaids, a resistance to reclaim personal autonomy and human dignity. Despite the oppressive control exerted by the regime of Gilead, resistance emerges from the handmaids. The protagonist, Offred, rejects the regime's-imposed identity and yearns for freedom from the past. Offred wants to dislocate her dehumanization and wants so desperately to be human again, to be her own self. Offred's narrative becomes a critical site of resistance. She creates a discourse through

her own account of life, through her remembrance of the past. Memory becomes the tool through which she creates a discourse of a life deeply connected to the past, making it a tool for maintaining a sense of self. Offred's memories include her life with her husband, Luke, her daughter and her experiences of personal freedom. These recollections from the past create a narrative that is directly opposite to the state-fostered discourse.

She tries to humanize herself, among the dehumanizing conditions of Gilead, by remembering her name, saying that "I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood, 1998, p. 97). Offred's act of remembering and asserting her name becomes an important point of resistance, as it challenges the regime's attempt to dehumanize her and other women by stripping them of their names and identities. Her assertion of being valuable highlights an important aspect of human dignity: the recognition of one's worth beyond material and utilitarian value. In the colonized regime of Gilead, women's identities are defined by the roles given to them: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts. These roles are stripped of their previous autonomy, having lost the jobs and money they once owned in the pre-Gilead society. But now they must live in roles defined by the regime of Gilead, unable to do jobs of their own will, and they are not allowed to read or write.

Foucault posits that "there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent" (1990, p. 96). In the society of Gilead, resistance is both overt and covert, ranging from public acts of defiance to internal acts of rebellion. Offred, too, displays diverse and multiple acts of resistance, as she says that "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (Atwood, 1998, p. 270). She violates the rule of using her former name, and through this act, she asserts her human identity. Offred's secret affair with Nick, her participation in the underground resistance group Mayday, and her subversive thoughts demonstrate the multiple acts of resistance that generate an opposing discourse. Her struggles not only encompass the arena of mental and emotional, but also the challenges of the physical and practical, showing resilience in both to demonstrate the extent of utopia concealed within a dystopia.

A Utopian Community

The resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead develops an alternative discourse, which fosters the creation of an imagined utopian community among the concubines. This opposite discourse serves as a counter-narrative to the stately fostered discourse, which seeks to control women and to position them as machines of reproduction, while the opposite discourse seeks to liberalize women from the chains of an oppressive regime. Foucault argues that "where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1990, p. 95). The concubines or the so-called handmaids group together in acts of resistance through secret communications, envisioning a utopia within the nightmarish, dystopic and oppressive regime of Gilead. The protagonist, Offred, looks upon by chance "a tiny writing... scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail... Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Atwood, 1998, p. 52), a Latin phrase translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down" which provides her with a sense of community. It connects Offred to the women who came before her, leaving behind a message of hope and a reminder of resilience. Anderson (2006) argues that imagined communities are created through the shared imagination of a common identity and a sense of belonging to a larger group. Offred develops a sense of connection and solidarity after reading the lines scratched on the wall. This phrase gives Offred the courage to resist the colonial order that persists in Gilead's society. She is pleased to develop a sense of a common identity as she says that "it pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy" (Atwood, 1998, p. 52). Offred's joy at discovering and repeating the words highlights the psychological and emotional support from knowing that other handmaids, too, share her struggles and resistance.

Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that shared experiences, struggles and resistances can foster a sense of belonging in a group even if its members have never met. The concubines establish among themselves a secret resistance group through a cypher word "Mayday", a French word meaning 'Help me'. This

secret group, open to every handmaid, forges the basis for a utopian community, a community bound by a common desire to bring down the Gilead from inside and to attain freedom and equality. All these multiple acts of resistances lead to the bricolage of a concubine society determined on the idea of resisting the colonial order of the theocratic totalitarian state. A utopian and a human space is created for the dehumanized handmaids, giving them a sense of belonging. The Handmaids yearn for a society that promises them the freedoms they once enjoyed, a world where they have control over their bodies, their relationships, and their lives. This imagined/utopian community creates meaning in the meaningless lives of the concubines and thus gives them a sense of hope to cope with life and to resist the oppressive regime. Through this community, Offred and other handmaids begin to develop a collective identity, a collective consciousness which gives them a purpose to continue the plurality of possible, necessary, improbable resistances, thereby envisioning a world free from the chains of dehumanization and oppression.

Conclusion

The Republic of Gilead uses both ISAs and RSAs to interpellate a stately fostered discourse, created by falsely interpreting the religious scripts, brainwashing and positioning the handmaids as mere machines of reproduction. Through the interpellation of this discourse, the handmaids are dehumanized and exploited by the state for national purposes. In response to the state's oppressive discourse, the handmaids develop a counter-ideology which leads to the bricolage of an imagined community among the concubines. In the dystopian state of Gilead, the creation of an imagined utopian community among the handmaids gives meaning to their lives and provides them with a reason to survive and cope with the oppressive state of Gilead. The bricolage of a concubine society or a utopian community provides handmaids with a sense of belonging and purpose amid the dystopian world's nightmarish times. In this way, this utopian community, born of shared struggles and collective identity, continues resisting the oppressive and dominant regime oppressing it, and succeeds in toppling the regime of Gilead.

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Ecofeminist Critique of Environmental Collapse and Its Impact on Women's Bodies in *Children of Men* (2006)

Areen Ansari Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, areen.ansari1.611@gmail.com
Qurratulaen Liaqat Associate Professor, Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan, qurratulaen@fccollege.edu.pk

ecofeminism, dystopia, biopolitics, commodification, marginalization

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) through an ecofeminist framework informed by Karen J. Warren's philosophy. The study explores how the film portrays the intersection between environmental collapse and patriarchal control, revealing how women's bodies become sites of exploitation and resistance. By analyzing the film's depiction of infertility, biopolitics, and ecological decay, the paper argues that *Children of Men* exposes the deep interrelation between environmental degradation and gender-based oppression. Through a close reading of visual and narrative elements, the study highlights how ecofeminist theory can illuminate the ways in which environmental and gender injustices are mutually reinforcing.

Introduction

Children of Men (2006), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, is a dystopian film that paints a grim picture of a future where humanity faces extinction due to widespread infertility. Set in 2027, the film's narrative unfolds in a world beset by environmental decay, political instability, and social chaos. Amidst this backdrop, the film explores profound themes related to the human condition, societal collapse, and the struggle for hope in an increasingly desolate world. The portrayal of a dystopian society grappling with ecological and reproductive crises makes *Children of Men* a poignant subject for analysis through an ecofeminist lens, which emphasizes the relation between environmental degradation and the treatment of marginalized groups, particularly women.

Ecofeminist theory, a branch of feminist thought, scrutinizes the links between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. It posits that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are intertwined, both rooted in patriarchal systems of power and control. This perspective is essential for understanding how environmental issues disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups. Karen J. Warren, a prominent ecofeminist theorist, argues that to address environmental problems effectively, one must also confront the social injustices that exacerbate them. In her seminal work, Warren aptly quotes Rosemary Radford Ruether: "Whatever the specific focus, ecofeminist philosophy is committed to the realization that there is no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (Warren, 2000, p. 13). This underscores the systemic oppressions that stand in the way of achieving true societal and ecological liberation.

Warren's ecofeminist philosophy provides a critical framework for analyzing *Children of Men*. The film, based on the novel by P. D. James, vividly illustrates the correlation between ecological collapse and gender-based injustices, particularly through its depiction of rampant infertility and patriarchal control over reproduction. The portrayal of women's bodies as commodities in a society struggling with environmental collapse highlights the dehumanizing effects of such crises. This paper aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics between environmental degradation and the exploitation of women's bodies, emphasizing how mainstream environmental practices often perpetuate and reinforce systems of oppression.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how *Children of Men* addresses the effects of climate change and environmental collapse on the population. The film's narrative offers a compelling exploration of how ecological crises worsen gender-based injustices, revealing the patriarchal mechanisms that seek to control and commodify women's bodies in the face of societal collapse. By analyzing key themes and narrative elements of the film through an ecofeminist lens, this paper aims to shed light on the often-ignored impacts of environmental degradation on women.

In examining the film, the paper will highlight how the infertility crisis central to the plot serves as a metaphor for broader environmental and societal breakdowns. It will investigate how the film portrays the patriarchal control over reproduction as symptomatic of deeper systemic issues. Additionally, the paper will discuss how the environmental decay depicted in the film mirrors real-world ecological crises and their disproportionate effects on marginalized groups. This analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex connections between environmental degradation and gender-based injustices, and to illustrate how ecofeminist perspectives can offer valuable insights into addressing these issues within cinematic narratives. Through a close examination of *Children of Men*, this paper endeavours to reveal the critical role that women play in the context of environmental collapse and to advocate for their inclusion in discussions and solutions related to ecological and societal resilience.

This research primarily employs film analysis, with textual and thematic analysis also used to thoroughly examine *Children of Men* through the lens of ecofeminism. Textual analysis will focus on dialogues and character interactions to uncover power dynamics and ideologies related to the themes of environment and gender-based issues. Moreover, thematic analysis will classify recurring themes, such as environmental degradation, the treatment of women, and societal collapse, and investigate the underlying messages and ideological perspectives presented in the film. The setting will be analyzed to understand how it constructs a dystopian world that serves as a warning about environmental neglect and societal inequalities, emphasizing the film's ecofeminist perspective and relevance to contemporary environmental and social justice discussions.

Theoretical Background

The advent of capitalism has profoundly transformed the global landscape, driving industrial growth, technological advancement, and economic expansion. However, this relentless pursuit of profit has come at a significant environmental cost. Capitalism's inherent demand for constant growth and resource extraction has led to widespread environmental degradation, contributing to climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. According to Naomi Klein, "A destabilized climate is the cost of deregulated, global capitalism, its unintended, yet unavoidable consequence" (Klein, 2014, p. 96). This unsustainable exploitation of the planet's resources is harmful to all forms of life, threatening ecosystems, animal species, and human communities alike. The ecological crises we face today are deeply connected with capitalist practices, which prioritize economic gains over environmental sustainability and human well-being.

Ecofeminism posits that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are fundamentally linked. The movement emerges as a critical perspective in understanding the interconnections between environmental degradation and social injustices, particularly those affecting women. Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal systems, which value domination and control, are responsible for both environmental destruction and gender inequality. According to ecofeminist theorist Vandana Shiva, "Women in diverse cultures... are often the most affected by environmental degradation, yet they are also the most active in ecological preservation and the most knowledgeable about sustainable living practices" (Shiva, 2010, p. 29). Ecofeminism is necessary because it advocates for a holistic approach to addressing environmental issues, one that considers the voices and experiences of women and other marginalized groups. By highlighting the interconnectedness of all life forms and emphasizing the need for equitable and sustainable practices, ecofeminism offers a crucial framework for addressing the environmental crises exacerbated by capitalist exploitation.

This paper will focus primarily on the works of Karen J. Warren, who has extensively explored the connections between environmental ethics and feminist theory. In her work, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Warren emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the interdependencies between ecological concerns and the marginalized status of women, people of color, the poor, and children. She asserts that "the logic of domination that justifies the subordination of women and the exploitation of nature is the same" (Warren, 2000, p. 14). Warren's ecofeminist philosophy calls for a dismantling of hierarchical structures that perpetuate these injustices and advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to environmental and social issues. Her philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and the need to address

environmental issues in conjunction with social inequalities. Warren's insights provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing the multifaceted impacts of environmental degradation, particularly on women and marginalized communities, and underscore the need for an integrated approach to ecological and social justice.

The current environmental collapse has significantly influenced the dystopian genre, which often serves as a reflection of contemporary societal anxieties and potential futures. Dystopian narratives, while set in speculative futures, are deeply rooted in present realities, offering a critique of current political, social, and environmental trends. The increasing frequency and severity of environmental disasters have prompted a surge in dystopian literature and films, which highlight the consequences of unchecked environmental degradation and the resulting socio-political turmoil. These narratives serve as both a warning and a mirror, showcasing the dire outcomes of continued environmental neglect and the urgent need for transformative action.

Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* epitomizes this intersection of dystopian fiction and contemporary environmental concerns. Set in a bleak future where humanity faces extinction due to global infertility, the film explores themes of environmental decay, social collapse, and the commodification of human life. The film starkly portrays the impact of environmental and societal breakdown, where the natural world is in ruins and human institutions have crumbled. As Miriam, one of the characters, laments, "As the sound of the playgrounds faded, the despair set in. Very odd, what happens in a world without children's voices" (Cuaron, 2006). This quote encapsulates the film's central concern with the loss of hope and the pervasive sense of despair that accompanies environmental collapse. In an interview for *Cinematical*, Cuarón points out that his approach to making this film was not so much "about imagining and being creative" but "about referencing reality." *Children of Men* serves as a powerful commentary on the consequences of environmental neglect and the ways in which societal structures fail to protect the most vulnerable.

Environmental degradation has profound and disproportionate effects on women's bodies, particularly in terms of health and reproductive rights. Research indicates that women are more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental pollutants, which can lead to a range of health issues, including reproductive disorders, cancers, and chronic illnesses. For instance, studies have shown that exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals, found especially in polluted environments, is linked to higher rates of infertility and adverse pregnancy outcomes (Woodruff et al., 2011). Biopolitics, a concept explored by the theorist Michel Foucault, refers to the ways in which states regulate and control populations by emphasizing bodily and reproductive health. In *Children of Men*, this control is evident as political parties, resistance movements, and governments try to gain control over Kee, the only pregnant woman in a world of infertility. Kee's body becomes a site of political contestation, her reproductive capacity commodified and instrumentalized by those in power. This reflects broader societal trends where women's bodies are often subjected to regulatory controls, especially in contexts of environmental and social crises. As Foucault observes, "biopolitics brings life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and makes knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault, 1990, p. 100). The film's depiction of Kee's struggle underscores the biopolitical implications of environmental degradation, highlighting the need for a more equitable and just approach to environmental and reproductive health.

In conclusion, the intersection of capitalism, environmental degradation, and biopolitics profoundly impacts women, especially those from marginalized communities. Ecofeminism offers a necessary framework for addressing these interconnected issues by advocating for an inclusive and holistic approach to ecological and social justice. Warren's ecofeminist philosophy provides critical insights into the interconnected oppressions that perpetuate environmental and gender injustices. Films like *Children of Men* not only reflect these dystopian realities but also serve as urgent calls to action, emphasizing the need to address the root causes of environmental and social collapse. As global warming exacerbates these challenges, it is imperative to consider the specific vulnerabilities of women and other marginalized groups and to develop strategies that promote sustainability, equity, and resilience.

Discussion

The world is currently grappling with unprecedented ecological crises, including climate

change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These issues have profound impacts on the environment and human life. Climate change, driven by human activities such as fossil fuel combustion and deforestation, is causing more frequent and severe weather events, rising sea levels, and shifting ecosystems. The resulting environmental degradation threatens food security, water resources, and human health. Marginalized communities, particularly the poor, immigrants, and women, are disproportionately affected by these crises. They often lack the resources and infrastructure to adapt to changing conditions, making them more vulnerable to natural disasters, displacement, and health issues. For instance, women in many parts of the world bear the brunt of climate change impacts, facing increased burdens in securing food, water, and energy for their families. Additionally, environmental toxins can have severe health impacts on reproductive health, leading to higher rates of infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects.

Ecofeminism highlights the interconnectedness of the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. It posits that the same patriarchal ideologies that subjugate women also drive environmental degradation. Ecofeminists argue for a holistic approach to ecological and social justice, emphasizing the need to address gender inequalities and environmental issues simultaneously. Warren, in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, asserts, "Environmental and feminist issues have their basis in the logic of domination that underwrites patriarchy, so feminists and environmentalists can form an alliance in the face of a common enemy, as it were, but for the connection between feminism and ecology to be necessary, it would have to be shown that patriarchy is inherently naturist." (Warren, 2000, p. 15). Her work underscores the importance of recognizing the interconnected oppressions that perpetuate environmental and gender injustices. Warren's motive behind writing the book was to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how ecological and feminist issues are intertwined and to advocate for a more inclusive approach to environmental ethics.

Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film, *Children of Men*, is a gripping depiction of a dystopian future set in 2027, where humanity is on the brink of extinction due to globalin fertility. Throughout the film, scenes of environmental decay and destruction are prevalent. The bleak, polluted landscapes and desolate urban environments serve as a constant visual reminder of the film's themes of environmental neglect and its consequences. Through its dystopian setting, Children of Men serves as a stark warning about global warming, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable and equitable solutions. The film's central themes include the fragility of human life, the consequences of environmental neglect, and the struggle for hope in a seemingly hopeless world. It portrays a society where immigrants, the poor, and women suffer the most. The infertility crisis becomes a metaphor for the broader ecological collapse, highlighting how the most vulnerable populations bear the brunt of such crises. Through its portrayal of a dystopian future, the film critiques current environmental policies and underscores the urgent need for sustainable and equitable solutions.

In addition to environmental decay, *Children of Men* highlights the severe societal inequalities prevalent in society. The film portrays a world where the gap between the rich and the poor has widened dramatically, and societal structures have begun to break down. The privileged live in fortified enclaves, while the marginalized, including immigrants and refugees, are subjected to brutal repression and inhumane conditions while being detained in these refugee camps. The camps resemble modern-day detention centers, emphasizing the film's critique of contemporary immigration policies. During the beginning scenes, Theo, the protagonist, witnesses the brutal treatment of refugees, highlighting the dehumanizing impact of political and environmental crises on marginalized populations. The scenes depict all the immigrants trapped in small-sized cages that resemble those in the zoos, and are treated as such. They do not have the space to sit or even lie down, with their pleas and screams going unheard. This highlights the inherent socio-political divide within society.

Another significant theme in the film is the commodification of women's bodies. Kee, a young immigrant woman, is the only known pregnant woman in the world. Her pregnancy becomes a symbol of hope and a target for various factions fighting for control. This reflects the biopolitical struggle where women's reproductive capacities are exploited for political gain. In one dialogue, Kee reveals her pregnancy to Theo, saying, "I'm scared, Theo. They will take my baby," underscoring the fear and vulnerability women face in a

world that subjugates their voices.

Women, Vulnerability, and Environmental Collapse

Environmental degradation has a profound impact on women's health and well-being. Studies have shown that women are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental pollutants, which can lead to a range of health issues, including reproductive disorders, cancers, and chronic illnesses. In the context of global warming, women in marginalized communities are particularly at risk. They often bear the primary responsibility for securing food, water, and energy, tasks that become increasingly difficult as environmental conditions worsen.

Despite this, modern medical research has long been criticized for neglecting women's bodies, leading to significant gaps in understanding and addressing female health issues. Historically, clinical trials have focused predominantly on male subjects, with women significantly underrepresented. This exclusion, often justified by concerns over hormonal fluctuations and pregnancy risks, has resulted in a lack of data on how drugs and treatments affect women differently from men (GAO 5). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women accounted for nearly 80% of anaphylactic reactions to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, highlighting the need for more gender-specific research (Shimabukuro et al., 155).

Moreover, global warming has increased the health disparities, disproportionately affecting women. Women, especially in low and middle income countries, are more vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change due to their roles as primary caregivers and increased exposure to environmental hazards. For instance, heatwaves pose significant health risks to pregnant women, with studies showing that exposure to extreme heat during pregnancy is associated with adverse birth outcomes like preterm birth and low birth weight (Bekkar et al., 2020). Furthermore, the spread of infectious diseases, influenced by climate change, disproportionately affects women. Diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and Zika virus are expanding into new regions due to rising global temperatures. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable; for example, Zika virus infection during pregnancy can cause severe congenital disabilities, yet there is limited research on how to protect pregnant women effectively in these scenarios (Meaney-Delman et al., 2016).

Keeping all these scientific research findings in sight, it is evident that in the case of a natural disaster or diseases, women will be sidelined while vaccines and treatments will be developed without adequately considering their unique biological needs, often resulting in adverse effects on women. This film, *Children of Men*, thus serves as a stark reminder that, despite its futuristic setting, women's bodies are still at a heightened risk of diseases and infertility. The film's depiction of a dystopian society, where women's reproductive capacities are commodified and controlled, mirrors current real-world issues where women's health concerns are frequently overlooked or inadequately addressed. This theme of women's vulnerability in times of crisis is also explored in other literary works. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a dystopian future where women's reproductive rights are tightly controlled by a totalitarian regime, reflecting fears about the control and commodification of women's bodies. Similarly, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* depicts a society devastated by climate change and social inequality, with women disproportionately suffering from the consequences. These narratives underscore the ongoing vulnerabilities faced by women in times of crisis, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches in both environmental and medical research.

Dystopia and Biopolitics

Children of Men vividly explores how state control and societal power dynamics manifest in the regulation and control of women's reproductive functions, a theme highly relevant to our contemporary society. The film portrays a world where women's bodies are simultaneously neglected and heavily controlled by various authoritative powers. For example, an official comments, "Avoiding fertility tests is a crime. Report all citizens who refuse tests to the Ministry of Health." (Cuaron, 2006) The government, resistance movements, and other factions all vie for control over Kee and her unborn child, reflecting broader societal trends where women's bodies are subject to regulatory controls, particularly during environmental and social crises. Kee's pregnancy and body become a political battleground, commodified and instrumentalized by those in power. Her situation highlights the

pervasive view that a woman's primary value lies in her reproductive capacity, as underscored when she reveals her pregnancy to Theo, saying, "Now you know what's at stake" (Cuaron, 2006). Once Theo learns about Kee's pregnancy, the Fishes members at the safe house discuss her future, with everyone coming up with different ideas on how to deal with her, without ever asking for her own opinion. This moment poignantly demonstrates how Kee's identity is reduced to that of a mere vessel for potential life, pivotal to the survival of humanity but stripped of personal autonomy.

Furthermore, Kee's marginalized status as an immigrant and a woman of color compounds her exploitation and discrimination. She becomes a target for various factions, each seeking to leverage her pregnancy for political power. The government and the resistance movement, known as the Fishes, both aim to use Kee's child to gain influence. In one scene, Julian, the leader of the Fishes, declares, "The government would never let her keep that baby. They'd take it away and give it to some minister's wife." (Cuaron, 2006) This dialogue reveals how Kee's autonomy is disregarded, and her child is seen as a mere tool for political gain. Her plight underscores the intersectionality of oppression she faces, being reduced to a pawn in a larger political game due to her reproductive ability, her status as a refugee, and her ethnicity. The commodification of women's bodies has long been embedded in socio-legal systems that reduce reproductive functions to economic exchange. As Katharine K. Baker discusses in her article "A Case for Permissive Regulations Governing Surrogacy" (1998), women's bodies have historically been treated as objects of trade, particularly in contexts involving reproduction. She notes that "women's bodies have been historically commodified in a way that normalizes the buying and selling of their reproductive capabilities" (p. 207).

The dystopian genre, exemplified by *Children of Men*, serves as a reflection of current societal anxieties and potential futures. These narratives highlight the consequences of unchecked environmental degradation and the resulting socio-political turmoil. While set in speculative futures, dystopian stories are deeply rooted in present realities, offering a critique of current political, social, and environmental trends. This film does not merely depict a bleak future; it serves as a warning about the consequences of our current environmental and political actions. The film's portrayal of societal collapse and environmental decay resonates with contemporary issues such as climate change, refugee crises, and the commodification of human life. Through its dystopian lens, the film urges viewers to reflect on the urgency of addressing these crises before they reach catastrophic proportions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Children of Men* serves as a potent narrative that connects both environmental neglect and societal inequalities to present a harrowing vision of the future. The film's dystopian setting starkly illustrates the severe repercussions of ignoring ecological and social justice. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of environmental health and human rights, underscoring the dire need for sustainable and equitable solutions. This research is crucial as it bridges significant gaps in ecofeminist and dystopian literature, providing a comprehensive analysis of how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized groups, particularly women and their health. By examining *Children of Men* through the lens of ecofeminism, this paper offers fresh insights into the ongoing discourse on environmental justice and gender equality. It highlights how the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women are closely linked, and how these issues are exacerbated in times of crisis.

Children of Men is not just a film about a dystopian future; it is a reflective critique of contemporary issues. It reveals the potential future consequences of our current actions and policies, urging us to reconsider and act upon the urgent need for environmental and social reforms. By highlighting the struggles of the marginalized, the film calls attention to the importance of inclusivity and equity in our approach to solving global crises. Through the portrayal of a world in ecological and social collapse, Children of Men serves as a reminder of the stakes involved in our current environmental and political decisions. It reinforces the message that the fight for environmental justice is inherently linked to the fight for human rights and gender equality. The research presented in this paper thus contributes to a deeper understanding of these issues, offering a critical perspective that is essential for fostering a more just and sustainable future.

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Humans on the Internet: From Utopia to Dystopia

Karolina Kossakowska-Dehnert Doctoral Legal Seminar, Koźmiński University kancelaria@kossakowska.pl

hate speech, online dangers, cybercrime, social media

ABSTRACT

The Internet has become an inseparable part of contemporary society. Few people today can imagine life without using various social media platforms. However, what does the Internet truly offer? The seemingly beautiful and utopian world presented through online photos and videos conceals a darker side. The dangers awaiting users who succumb too easily to this idealized vision can have serious real-life and legal consequences, ranging from data fraud, identity theft, and financial crimes to human trafficking and child exploitation. Online hate speech has also contributed to the psychological and social destruction of individuals who lacked the resources or strength to cope with it. This paper aims to address the question of whether the Internet poses a genuine threat to its users, or whether such concerns merely reflect a dystopian vision of human helplessness in the digital age.

Introduction

Social media has taken over the time of Internet users. The latest research conducted by NASK reveals that young people spend up to 6 hours daily using the Internet. Most of this time is spent doomscrolling through social media. Instagram is full of happy people promoting life in harmony with nature with plumped-up faces. Luxurious lifestyle, under the slogan „it is not about money, it's about relationships", attracts new users. However, the beautiful, utopian world presented in photos and videos on social media has its darker side. The dangers that await a user who is overly tempted by the utopian vision of the Internet may have serious consequences in both life and law. Starting from petty thefts, data fraud, identity theft, financial crimes, to kidnappings, human trafficking, and child pornography. The hate speech on the Internet has often led to the destruction of people who did not have enough strength to deal with it. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that using the Internet is a real threat to every user, and it is not just a dystopian vision of a helpless person.

Instagram and the other disasters

Instagram, one of the most popular social networking apps, was launched in 2010. To show the scale of the phenomenon, 25,000 people joined Instagram on the first day. users. Three months of the portal's operation were enough to gather a million users. Currently, approximately 800 million people worldwide use Instagram, with Poles accounting for around 6 million. The creators of Instagram intended to create a platform for users to communicate through photos. The application enables users to upload photos and short videos, and apply filters to enhance their appearance. With the development of social networking sites, users began to publish and view more and more colorized photos, and over time, the photos began to differ more and more from reality. Finally, by entering the Instagram application, users enter the utopian world of beautiful people constantly travelling to remote destinations, dining in exquisite restaurants. A world of happy, rich people who lack nothing. People whose work is their passion, and children who are polite and always happy. However, behind the beautiful faces smiling from Instagram photos, there are many dangers resulting from the imprudent use of social networking sites. The consequences may be of various types, ranging from life, social, and health to legal, which are of particular interest to this study.

When logging into Instagram for the first time, users are required to accept the platform's terms and conditions. The vast majority do not read them before giving consent, remaining unaware of the potential legal implications of their agreement. In the opening paragraphs of Instagram's Terms of Use, the platform states: "We do not claim ownership of your content, but you grant us a license to use it" (*Instagram Help Center*, n.d.-a). Although this statement appears to reassure users that the rights to their content remain with them, the

subsequent explanation clarifies that "when you share, post, or upload content covered by intellectual property rights (such as photos or videos) on or in connection with our Service, you grant us a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of your content (consistent with your privacy and app settings)" (*Instagram Help Center*, n.d.-a). By publishing photos or videos on Instagram, users therefore grant the platform extensive rights to use their content, which may include their own image or the image of others appearing in the shared material. Such permissions can lead to significant legal consequences, especially concerning image rights and data protection.

Legal consequences of posting photos

First of all, a photo of a portal user may be used without the user's consent, e.g., by advertising agencies, which, by advertising various products, will generate revenue using the user's image, leaving them out of the financial distribution. Having no control over how someone uses a photo posted on Instagram, having no influence on whether the photo will be processed or promote products or services with which they do not identify.

A more serious consequence of publishing photos on the Internet is the theft of the user's identity. It is possible to use photos to create a profile that makes it more credible. Then, using such a fake profile, they commit other crimes, most often extorting further personal data and financial resources. Identity theft can be multifaceted and used in various ways. By obtaining the user's photos and basic personal data, the cybercriminal can then obtain more detailed information by impersonating the victim. The data obtained may be used to submit loan applications, facilitate financial fraud, and further compromise the data of the user's friends and relatives. The spiral created by the cybercriminal becomes increasingly intense as he continues to share precise information about a given user. Publishing photos, locations, and places of work, and tagging loved ones, may endanger not only the user but also the group of people who have relationships with him or her on Instagram.

To extort user data, cybercriminals often conduct phishing attacks. This action involves sending a message, creating the need for urgent action on the part of the user. Under time pressure, the user who is the target of an attack has little time to consider their decisions and actions, and ultimately acts under the influence of emotions. In this way, data is stolen, but phishing is also used to extort funds. To strengthen phishing, cybercriminals also use ransomware, i.e., malware that spreads when a user clicks on a malicious link. The software is blocked, and the user becomes a hostage until payment is made to the cybercriminal. Often, sensitive user data is shared by other users, making it easier for cybercriminals to engage in illicit activities. This phenomenon is described as doxxing and, next to hate speech, is the most popular form of cyberbullying.

A popular crime is a scam - a type of online fraud that aims to gain financial benefits by deceiving the victim into trusting them. Many online criminals exploit people's emotions, capitalizing on their compassion and willingness to help. The scammer usually comes up with a heartwarming story - for example, a sick child who urgently needs money for medicine or surgery. As evidence, the fraudster creates falsified bills for treatment, photos or requests for help from loved ones. Fake fundraising is most often conducted on social media, where users are motivated by the desire to help share a link to the website with their friends. Unfortunately, the money from the false collection goes to the fraudsters' account.

Considering that Instagram is a platform where users communicate primarily through photos and short videos, cybercriminals have adapted their operating techniques to exploit these visual media. With the growing use of artificial intelligence in everyday life, new threats have emerged for social media users. Cybercriminals now use AI to process photos, voices, and videos to obtain material for illicit purposes, such as creating deepfake content for extortion or fraud (Europol, 2023). Online fraudsters employ AI-generated material depicting the victim's likeness and voice to deceive the victim's relatives, claiming the person is in danger and requesting money. Other common methods include blackmail, where perpetrators threaten to release manipulated or fabricated intimate content unless a ransom is paid (Interpol, 2023). Such material is often distributed on adult websites or sent to family members or employers—a tactic known as the "boss scam" or "CEO fraud." These crimes are facilitated by

users' tendency to overshare personal images on social platforms, making it easy to identify and target partners, friends, or colleagues. Recent data show that only 49% of social media users verify the authenticity of profiles or messages they receive (Statista, 2024), which significantly increases the risk of victimization.

Consequences of posting children's photos

Photos posted on Instagram often depict children who may become victims of crimes by having their images shared. The common "phenomenon of sharenting" can be used in a similar way to the one indicated above, but it may have much more far-reaching consequences.

Sharenting and its extreme version of troll parenting involve sharing photos of one's own children online with varying intensity. When parents post photos or videos of their children, they often share not only beautiful moments, but also use mocking materials about, showing children in embarrassing situations, sometimes naked, crying, or even in situations that pose a threat to their health or life. Sharenting repeatedly humiliates the child and discredits the child in the eyes of the recipient. Therefore, the phenomenon of sharing is considered another form of cyberbullying. Based on what users who are parents post, cybercriminals have even greater opportunities to use the child's image.

There is a phenomenon called baby role play (also called digital kidnapping), which is a crime involving the use of a stolen image of a child to fulfil fantasies, including sexual or violent ones, by unknown people. The child's image downloaded from the Internet is placed on a specially created profile in social media, and the child is given a new name. The fake profile includes a description of their activities, likes and dislikes. The person sharing the child's image may play various roles, e.g. the child's parent. Other users can post and comment, building a usually sexual narrative around the initially neutral photo. There were over 55,000 photos shared on Instagram in 2015, tagged with #babyrp, #adoptionrp, and #orphantrp.

Publishing children's faces in their everyday environment allows unauthorized persons to locate the child. Many parents post photos from school, spend time watching their children's extra-curricular activities, and mark the hotels they travel to. This makes it easier for criminals to reach children. The Internet is also used for human trafficking, child pornography and deviations, which users often forget about. Social media users forget that a photo or video posted on Instagram has hidden data - metadata. Such information is hidden in EXIF files. EXIF – short for Exchangeable Image File Format – becomes part of the photo, which is written to a photo file by a digital camera or photo editing software. The EXIF standard was created by the Japan Electronics and Information Technology Industries Association (JEITA) and has been in effect since 1995. Most digital cameras and smartphones support it. The EXIF file contains a number of information about the photo, including: date of taking the photo, shutter speed when taking the photo, camera model, camera parameters (e.g. ISO sensitivity, aperture, focal length), exposure settings, resolution, photo orientation, image format, flash on/off, file size, thumbnail of the original frame, geolocation data if the photo was taken using a device with a GPS module (e.g. smartphones have it). This information is saved automatically in the photo file. When viewing photos, the EXIF data is invisible. It can be viewed using special software or the built-in photo viewer function. Metadata is used by cybercriminals to obtain a lot of information from one photo, which can help trace the person who took the photo and posted it on a social networking site. This is a simpler and legal solution compared to the actions described above. The mere fact of obtaining metadata from a photo does not constitute a crime. You don't have to delve into the darknet to fall victim to people who will do almost anything for money.

Hate speech in social media

A common threat that affects almost every Instagram user is hate speech. The development of the Internet, including the expansion of social networking sites, has enabled users to establish relationships and react to published photos quickly. It would be utopian to claim that all comments under photos and videos are positive, or that if they are negative, they constitute constructive criticism. The level of expression on the Internet is clearly decreasing, and users, feeling anonymous, cross the line of criticism and resort to hate. Hate speech lacks a specific definition in international human rights; it is a term used to describe broad discourse that is extremely negative and constitutes a threat to social harmony. According to the Committee of Ministers, hate speech is understood

as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. Along with the development of new forms of media, online hate speech has been brought about.

Research I conducted on a group of almost a thousand Instagram users shows that almost 70% of them have encountered hate speech on the Internet. In contrast, almost 60% of them have experienced hate speech personally. The respondents indicated that hate speech most often concerns their origins, appearance, and their activities both on the Internet and in everyday life. Hate hits the user, his psyche. Research conducted by NASK shows that more than two-thirds of young Internet users (68.4%) claim that hate speech is a problem on the Internet. There is an increasing feeling among teenagers that people who insult people on the Internet go unpunished. However, hate speech is a real threat to users of social media and may constitute many crimes, depending on the actual situation. Hate speech includes the following acts: defamation (Article 212 of the Penal Code), insult (Article 216 of the Penal Code), the threat of discrimination (Article 119 of the Penal Code), criminal threat (Art. 190 of the Penal Code), persistent harassment, so-called „stalking" (art. 190a of the Penal Code), forcing another person to take a specific action by threat (art. 191 of the Penal Code), false accusations (art. 234 of the Penal Code), inciting and praising a crime (art. 255 of the Penal Code), incitement to hatred based on national differences (art. 256 of the Penal Code), public insult due to national, ethnic, racial or religious affiliation or non-denomination (art. 257 of the Penal Code), malicious disturbance.

People who experience hate speech on the Internet often face exclusion in real life, and in extreme cases, this can lead to suicide. The spiral of threats is growing because, often chasing dreams of becoming someone else on the Internet and joining the utopian life of influencers, young people resort to risky behaviours that they would not do in real life. They create profiles on social media to present sexual content for profit. However, they do not see the threat that may appear soon, which is that such materials will eventually be seen by their family, friends, and coworkers. And explicit materials processed by AI may pose a real risk of destroying someone's future. This is not only a problem for adults, as there is no real age verification on social media, so children already have access to them. Some of them are voluntary profiles, but there are also profiles that exploit children by promoting child pornography.

Dangers on the Internet for young people

Young people face a full spectrum of online challenges, ranging from the fun and inconsiderate to those that pose dangers. Three out of ten teenagers admitted that in the last year, they took part in a challenge that could have put their own or other people's life or physical/mental health at risk. According to UNICEF research (The State of the World's Children 2021; On My Mind: promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health), conducted in 21 countries around the world, over 13 per cent of teenagers aged 10-19 are diagnosed with mental disorders. This is nearly 86 million young people aged 15-19 and 80 million aged 10-14. Among the reported ailments, anxiety and depression constitute the largest percentage (almost 40%) of all diagnosed disorders. If left untreated, in extreme cases, they can even lead to suicide. According to UNICEF, suicide is the fourth most common cause of death among teenagers, and on average, about 46,000 people take their lives each year. children aged 10–19. Research shows that every year, the number of users who have been subjected to hate and, as a result, struggle with depression is growing rapidly.

Conclusion

Instagram users often set themselves unrealistic goals while scrolling through the platform. They aspire to emulate the influencers they observe daily. They want luxury, wealth, happiness. About 40% of Instagram users use it to feel better. Observing utopian online life, users compare it with their real life, and this is where they hit a wall. Their lives, compared to the Internet world, no longer seem so happy and colorful. That often leads to self-doubt and depression. Combined with hate speech, Instagram's utopian vision turns into a dystopia. Freeing yourself from your tormentor in real life is much easier than on the Internet. The common slogan "The Internet does not forget" perfectly illustrates how long Internet crimes will remain in cyberspace along with

their victims.

Every day, an Instagram user forgets that a criminal world is operating next to them. A world of unscrupulous people who will use every opportunity to get rich. By unknowingly publishing their personal information on the Internet, users make it easier for fraudsters to operate. Users of social networking sites, flying like moths to the light, can get seriously burned or even lose their lives if they are not careful. Let the summary of this paper be a quote that perfectly illustrates the fine line between the conscious use of social networking sites and the threats posed by thoughtlessly posting content in cyberspace: we are just an unhappy generation with happy pictures on social media.

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Morality in the Times of Dystopia: Sacrifice, Loyalty, and Ethical Choices in the World of *Divergent*

Aisha Khan Department of English, Forman Christian College University, Lahore, aishaaxo04@gmail.com

morality, personal sacrifice, ethical choices, loyalty, moral development

ABSTRACT

This study examines the moral dynamics and motivations that drive the characters' decisions to make personal sacrifices and remain loyal in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. It illuminates the depth of their relationships and their unwavering commitment to ethical principles in a dystopian setting. The analysis focuses particularly on the protagonist, Beatrice Prior, tracing the difficult moral choices she faces and the risks she takes for the sake of others. Despite adversity and danger, the characters demonstrate loyalty, selflessness, and a readiness to protect one another, reflecting the human capacity for ethical resilience. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these motivations, the study applies Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which explains how individuals progress through different stages of moral reasoning—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. By using this theoretical framework, the research examines the characters' moral dilemmas and the reasoning behind their decisions to sacrifice and remain loyal. Through the lens of moral development theory, the study offers insight into the ethical dimensions of sacrifice, loyalty, and moral growth in a dystopian world.

Introduction

The novel, *Divergent*, was authored by Veronica Roth. It was published in 2011 and belongs to the young adult dystopian science fiction genre. The narrative is set in a dystopian future world, Chicago, where an oppressive government and faction leaders control the individuals, the society is divided into five factions – Abnegation, Amity, Condor, Dauntless, and Erudite – each faction embodies a particular value or virtue: selflessness, peace, honesty, bravery, and knowledge, respectively. The narrative revolves around the protagonist Beatrice Prior, also known as Tris, born into the Abnegation faction, which values selflessness. She later discovers she is a divergent, who possesses the ability to think independently and resist the manipulation by faction leaders; therefore, she is more vulnerable to exclusion and persecution by the oppressive government. Tris joins the Dauntless faction and undergoes rigorous training, discovering a sinister and malicious plot being hatched by the Erudite to overthrow the present government. The narrative, in short, focuses on Tris' journey, characterized by sacrifices and selflessness, navigation of complexities and resistance to control to achieve freedom.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology and textual analysis, utilizing a close reading of the text to identify significant events and character interactions that reflect the characters' moral thinking processes, psychological, and sociological aspects. These aspects shape the characters and their responses to the complex ethical challenges presented in the dystopian context. The study employs the theoretical framework of Moral Development, as postulated by Lawrence Kohlberg, to explore the primary reasons behind the decisions, behaviors, and actions of characters within the context of Moral Development. In particular, the study will focus on how the choices made by the characters align with or deviate from Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The first level, i.e., the Pre-conventional level, comprises stages characterized by obedience and punishment. As per Kohlberg, "this stage takes an egocentric point of view. A person at this stage does not consider the interests of others or recognize they differ from the others and does not relate two points of view" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 445). An individual's main concern is to follow rules to avoid consequences rather than understand the needs and feelings of others. The stage two focuses on individualistic purpose and exchange, notably, the perspective is increasingly individualistic. The Conventional level, comprising stages three and four, pertains to mutual interpersonal expectations, social system and conscience maintenance. Kohlberg opines that an individual at stage three, "is aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations, which take primacy over individual interests." Moreover, at this

stage, "he or she does not consider generalized "system" perspective" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 446). However, at stage four, differences between societal and interpersonal points of view emerge; therefore, an individual at this stage considers the viewpoints articulated by the system, whereby different roles and rules have been outlined. The last level of moral development is Post-conventional, which consists of stages five and six. The individual, at stage five, takes a prior-to-society perspective, moreover, integrating it with mechanisms of agreement, objective impartiality, contract, and due process. At the last stage, individuals consider the moral viewpoint, thereby, basic moral premises and respect for other individuals prevail.

This research is significant as it examines the intricate psychological and social factors that drove the characters' actions and motivations. This study, by exploring the selflessness, sacrificial, and ethical nature of the characters, forms an understanding of their moral development and dilemmas within the dystopian context. The application of the moral development framework in dystopian science fiction contributes to understanding the intricacies and challenges prevalent in societies.

Theoretical Framework: Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory

This study is grounded in Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development to understand how a child develops morality and the ability for moral reasoning. Kohlberg's theory (1981) draws on the works of Jean Piaget and proposes that moral development occurs in six stages, which can be broadly categorized into three levels, i.e., Pre-conventional, Conventional, and Post-conventional levels (Kohlberg). The level one, pre-conventional morality, is composed of two stages, which occur till the age of nine. At this stage, children's decisions are influenced by adults and the fear of consequences for breaking rules. Level two, conventional morality, focuses on the development of interpersonal relations and maintaining social order. The adolescents internalize the moral standards learnt from society or their role models. Level three, post-conventional morality, the highest level of moral development, is characterized by comprehension of abstract principles of morality, contemplation of the principles of ethics, and abstract reasoning.

Wardana, Muhammad Kiki, and Sumita Roy, in the study "Ideology and Class Division in Veronica Roth's Divergent", explore the novel from the perspective of the class division between the factions and their distinct ideologies. This study employs a descriptive approach whereby the events and occurrences of the novel are meticulously broken down for the attainment of data and analysis; moreover, it is grounded in the theory of ideology that was propounded by Raymond Williams. It serves as the core of cultural ideology, which is further explored in the context of the novel and classes. All five factions are embedded with their unique ideologies and self-trait, which dictate the normative behaviour for the individuals, who must therefore adhere to it. The study further contends that bourgeois culture and ideology evidently prevail in society. Notably, in the context of the novel, the faction, Erudite, is the elite, dominant class and the ruling faction, whereas Abnegation are the proletariat, or in other words, the slaves or working classes of the society. It is argued that each of the factions had its own distinct ideologies despite originating from the same founding fathers.

Muir, Mackenzie in the study, "Conform to a Faction or Be Factionless? The Struggle Between Individuality and Conformity in Veronica Roth's Dystopian Novel, *Divergent*" explores the themes of individuality and conformity, and the nature of conflict between them in the backdrop of post-apocalyptic Chicago, which has been categorized into five factions each faction is characterized by one dominant core value. This study also sheds light on the oppressive governmental actions to enforce and implement the strict societal norms and regulations in order to induce conformity and suppress individuality. Muir in the study highlights the conflict between individuality and conformity by analyzing the character of the protagonist. The study argues that the character of Tris and her journey, characterized by transition embodying divergent traits, unveils the struggle of finding one's true identity in a conformist society. Muir further argues that symbolism plays a vital role in the narrative, and the colours and material symbols signify the values, identities, and ideologies of the factions. The study contends that these elements demonstrate the oppressive nature of societal norms to enforce conformity and suppress identities; thus, unveiling the detrimental consequences of societal control and curtailment of individuality.

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in the study, "The Comparative Literature Analysis of Collins' Novel *The Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's Novel *Divergent*" wherein, the main characters from the respective novels, Katniss and Tris are analyzed through the feminist approach. This study aims to shed light on the feminist values embodied by the characters in the novel, by exploring the similarities and differences in the characters' motivations, actions, and roles in the backdrop of the social conditions. The characters Katniss and Tris from the novels *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are battling with the prevailing social injustice throughout the course of the novels. The study finds both of the female protagonists to be very prominent in their struggle against social injustice; both characters, through their actions, embody feminist values and traits. The study also suggests the undertones of feminist ideology are evident through the actions, thoughts, gestures, behaviours – both implicit and explicit – of the protagonists. The study establishes that Tris, the protagonist of Roth's novel, personifies feminist ideals, as she does not fear confronting the perpetrators of injustice in society.

Eugene Mathes, in the study "An Evolutionary Perspective on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development", verifies that moral development and social evolution progress simultaneously. Notably, at stages one and two, the primary reason to behave morally is to avoid punishment and receive rewards; at these stages, moral behaviour is externally determined. Subsequently, at stage three, moral behaviour obligates individuals to care for their family similar to the morality of hunter gatherer societies; at stage four, morality entails obeying the authorities, conforming with the prevalent norms, laws and legal system; at stage five, morality encompasses reasoning, aligned with democratic rules; finally, at stage six, morality entails that individuals should adhere to the universal ethical principles. These hypotheses, for each stage of moral development, were tested by asking the participants about their inclination to invest in self, children, parents, friends, and strangers. Accordingly, the study established that Kohlberg's stages of moral development are intertwined with social evolution; the findings revealed stage one and two are meant to protect self-interest, stage three is aligned with hunter gatherer social structure and morality focusing on investing in close relations; stage four resonates the sentiments of nationalism; stage five, correlated with nationalistic perspective rather than being international; whereas, stage six embodied support for international social structure. The study, therefore, contends that moral development and social evolution evolved simultaneously. However, they have been influenced by the abstract nature of ideologies and cultural factors.

Moral Choices and Ethical Growth in *Divergent*

The notion of morality refers to the sense of right and wrong; the distinction between right and wrong is developed over time, and the theme of morality, along with its associated traits of selflessness and sacrifice, reverberates in the narrative. The characters in the novel make sacrifices for others, depicting selflessness, which is the motivation or driving force behind their actions, and is intertwined with the notion of morality and moral development. The motivations behind the actions of the protagonist and other characters in the novel are primarily influenced by their experiences, the dystopian nature of their existence, and their affiliation with their respective faction. Tris' journey in the novel is rooted in her desire to protect those around her and embody the values of selflessness. Her actions later in the novel personify this behavior, depicting the strong influence of Abnegation traits and values on her actions. The Abnegation values have been described in the narrative in these, "At the Abnegation table, we sit quietly and wait. Faction customs dictate even idle behavior and supersede individual preference" (Roth, 2011, p. 13), the narrative further reads, "I doubt all the Erudite want to study all the time, or that every Condor enjoys a lively debate, but they can't defy the norms of their factions any more than I can" (Roth, 2011, p. 13). Although Tris's decision to leave Abnegation and join Dauntless is seen as a rebellious act, it is still a significant sacrifice, as it involves leaving behind her family, marking the beginning of her moral development. Tris demonstrates selflessness at various occasions in the novel, for instance, when Tris takes Al's place in front of the knives, her actions are praised by her peers for displaying toughness and neglecting the fact that her actions were intended to protect Al instead of demonstrating toughness. The narrative also establishes that the most impressive and brave portrayal of strength is embodied in selflessness, grounded in the desire to help others, which is an Abnegation value.

At various points in the novel, Tris is burdened with making ethical choices. Consider this instance from the novel, where Tris encounters Tobias, who is also known as Four, who is under the mind control drug; Tris contemplates whether to kill him or not, eventually deciding to hand her gun over, making it easier for him to kill her. At this point the Abnegation the value of love and care overpower as she doubts killing her friend, "I can't kill him. I am not sure if I love him; not sure if that's why. But I am sure of what he would do if our positions were reversed. I am sure that nothing is worth killing him for" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Initially, Tris contemplates whether she should kill Tobias, and eventually decides against it; this particular action embodies the caring and sacrificial values. Tris further alludes towards her father's teaching of power in self-sacrifice, "My father says, used to say that there is power in self-sacrifice. I turn the gun in my hands and press it into Tobias's palm" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Her decision to surrender and sacrifice herself, is a major ethical choice she makes which reflects the influence of her Abnegation roots; the narrative notes, "He pushes the barrel into my forehead. My tears have stopped, and the air feels cold as it touches my cheeks. I reach out and rest my hand on his chest so I can feel his heartbeat" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Tris's act of bravery and self-sacrifice is a testament to the fact that she internalizes the Abnegation values.

The protagonist, evidently, is driven by the desire to protect others, doing the right thing even if it requires a sacrifice. She has undoubtedly inherited this quality from her parents, who depicted selflessness and sacrificed their lives for Tris' future. During the coup by the Erudite faction to seize control, Tris loses both her parents, Natalie and Andrew Prior, who die defending their community against the attack on Abnegation orchestrated by the Erudite faction; notably, the Dauntless soldiers were used to carry out the attack. Tris' parents personify selflessness, as they willingly opt to stay behind despite being aware of the impending danger, meanwhile, helping others to escape; Tris' safety is owed to their sacrifice. It is pertinent to mention that the loss Tris experiences early on in the novel becomes a catalyst behind her journey, characterized by self-discovery and resistance against an oppressive regime. Her parents' sacrifice, which kept her alive, reinforces the theme of selflessness, a quality later depicted in the actions of the protagonist. Her parents' death impacts her psychologically, as she engages with the principles of social justice and human rights; debatably, she even finds her principles conflicting with those of the regime; therefore, she undertakes a journey of resistance. Tris' actions and motivations to protect others also showcase an understanding of the moral principles. At this point, it is inevitable to refer towards the sixth stage of post-conventional morality, the highest level, characterized by engagement with the abstract principles of morality. Kohlberg enunciates post-conventional morality as the "perspective of a moral point of view from which social arrangements derive or on which they are grounded. The perspective is rational individual recognizing the nature of morality, basic moral premise of respect for other persons as ends, not means" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 448). Tris embodies the conventional level of moral development whereby the perspective regarding the social arrangements, laws, and regulations is not based on the societal norms, but rather on the moral standpoint of those rules, which leads towards a conflict between social norms and abstract moral principles.

Tris confronts her gravest fears during the course of her training with the Dauntless, who believe fear, synonymous with cowardice, is the core problem with the human race. Therefore, all of the Dauntless members undertook a journey to overcome their fears. The narrative also establishes that fear is a basic part of human nature; however, human existence requires rationalizing those fears. During the training, Tris is injected with hallucinogenic serums referred to as the simulations in the novel; the dauntless members undergo simulations to control their fears amidst chaos. The novel reads, "What's the simulation? Ever hear the phrase face your fears? he says. We're taking that literally. The simulation will teach you to control your emotions in the midst of a frightening situation" (Roth, 2011, p. 142). Tris, under the influence of the serums, encounters her worst fears; however, she eventually copes with them by accepting them as realities. Moreover, she, being a divergent, finds it relatively easy to resist these serums by telling herself, "Simulations aren't real; they pose no real threat to me, so logically, I shouldn't be afraid of them" (Roth, 2011, p. 142). It is evident in the novel that Tris' biggest fear is losing her family; nevertheless, she depicts phenomenal bravery when faced with this nightmarish simulation, as she remarks, "I have done this before—in my fear landscape, with the gun in my

hand, a voice shouting at me to fire at the people I love" (Roth, 2011, p. 29). Thus, bravery is further evident in Tris' actions when the narrative contrasts the cowardice of the government controlling the soldiers and factions, with Tris' bravery and decision to endanger her own life, depicting selflessness. While the Erudite and Dauntless governments are controlling the individuals from remote areas far away from the actual conflict zones, Tris surrenders the weapon in front of Tobias, who is being controlled by the Erudite mind control drug, endangering her own life. Her selfless action helped Tobias to break through the control of the drug primarily by depicting courage, willpower and strength in the true sense. In contrast, other characters of the novel do not depict these traits. She contemplates her decision of not killing someone in this situation, "I volunteered to die instead, that time, but I can't imagine how that would help me now. But I just know, I know what the right thing to do is" (Roth, 2011, p. 290). Tris demonstrates post-conventional stage morality at this point, as she takes the bravery under the perverse and life-threatening circumstances by deciding to surrender and sacrifice her life rather than killing a loved one.

Although the factions are tools of the oppressive regimes to control the individuals, they instil loyalty to the factions and their fundamental principles and values in the members. The dilemma arises from the conflict between individuality and conformity, stemming from the controlling nature of the government. The nature of loyalty between factions and individuals is not limited to their superficial association with a certain faction or wearing of their symbols and colors. Rather it extends to the individuals' way of thinking and behaving; at this point consider what the novel reads, "Intentions are the only thing they care about. They try to make you think they care about what you do, but they don't. They don't want you to act a certain way" it further reads, "They want you to think a certain way. So, you're easy to understand. So, you won't pose a threat to them" (Roth, 2011, p. 192). The factions do not provide the members any choice; rather, they prescribe standard behavior, values, and rules that must be adhered to by the members of the faction. Consider what the narrative notes in this context: "Every faction conditions its members to think and act a certain way. And most people do it. For most people, it's not hard to learn, to find a pattern of thought that works and stay that way" (Roth, 2011, p. 270). Tris embodies the value of sacrifice and serving others, which she inherits from her Abnegation roots. "Tris was born into the Abnegation faction and spent the first part of her life serving others, wearing grey clothes, and always offering help. She never questioned why she had to be so selfless; she was just told to" (Muir, 2023, p. 31). The affinity with the factions is evident in the conditioning of the individuals; the reiteration of factional values eventually results in a psychological embedding in the minds of the faction members. This is how factions establish control over the individuals and their actions. Muir further notes, "Tris was repeatedly told by her parents to offer her seat up on the bus, help the neighbors... donate any food or change to the poor. With every selfless action, Tris became more and more accustomed to her Abnegation value" (Muir, 2023, p. 31). The individuals remain loyal to their respective factions and adapt their personalities to the prescribed rules by the factions.

The most significant dilemma faced by the characters in the novel is due to the conflict between individuality and conformity in a society characterized with oppressive governmental control, apparently, for their own safety and security, to ensure restoration of peace and stability (Muir, 2023). The protagonist of the novel, Tris, is born in the Abnegation faction, who embody the value of selflessness; however, as the narrative proceeds further, Tris discovers that the factions are merely another instrument enforced on the individuals by the leaders to control and limit their freedom (Muir, 2023). Throughout the course of the novel, the faction leaders attempt to control the society and its individuals; the primary purpose of the system or government, corrupted by power and control, is to accumulate power and maintain control (Muir, 2023). The protagonist, embodying the conflict between individuality and conformity, struggles to find her true values and identity, due to which she is labelled as a divergent. The notion of divergent refers to individuals who demonstrate the ability to correspond with various factions, rather than just one that embodies a certain value (Muir, 2023). The fact that Tris is a divergent exposes her to immense dangers because, "if the leaders find out someone's different and cannot conform to one faction, the individual faces the risk of being murdered" (Muir, 2023, p. 30). Divergent identity, embodying individualistic traits, in defiance of societal norms,

inevitably leads towards significant dangers.

The defiance of social norms, as per Kohlberg's theory of moral development, embodies the conventional level of morality whereby "a person at this stage separates [their] own interests and points of view from those of authorities and others. He or she is aware everybody has individual interests to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 445). Tris' individualistic nature is evident as she remarks, "But our minds move in a dozen different directions" (Roth, 2011, p. 270), depicting her inability to conform or align herself with one particular perspective. The novel further reads, "We can't be confined to one way of thinking, and that terrifies our leaders. It means we can't be controlled. And it means that no matter what they do, we will always cause trouble for them" (Roth, 2011, p. 270). She criticizes the leadership, as it has become their necessity to enforce conformity, to accumulate power and control the people; correspondingly, freedom of thinking terrifies the leaders as it threatens their control over the society and the enforced ideological incarceration. The governmental policy of dividing individuals into factions helps to subjugate and control them by conditioning them in conformist way primarily by curbing their individuality (Muir, 2023) the individuals after their division in faction must adhere to their values and rules; this fact has been illustrated in the novel, the narrative contrasts the controlling and oppressive nature of the faction, with, the submissive and conformist nature of individuals to adhere with the prescribed set of rules. The oppressive regime's quest to establish control over the society compels her to resist the Erudite coup.

Conclusion

The journey of characters, particularly Tris, is characterized by sacrifices and selflessness; the narrative, on a broader level, comments on the dynamics of sacrifice and loyalty in the backdrop of a dystopian society and the nature of existence. The study finds the actions and behaviors of characters, particularly Tris, to be driven by their faction's ideology, values, teachings and the subsequent regulations imposed on them by the factional leaders. Moreover, the values of selflessness and sacrifice embodied by the characters reflect their alignment with the different stages of moral development as outlined in the model proposed by Kohlberg. Tris, for instance, by prioritising sacrifice and selflessness, embodies the third and highest stage of moral development as she engages with abstract and complex notions of morality. The study finds that the source of the moral dilemma in the novel lies in the conflict between individuality and conformity, stemming from the existence of an oppressive and uncontrolled society. The long-term psychological effects of being in a society that restricts personal liberties and how this affects the characters' perception of loyalty and sacrifice could also be examined in this study. Lastly, it examines how the novels' themes relate to contemporary social issues, such as revolt, conformity, and the quest for identity in a society where control is escalating.

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Neuroculture: The Construction of a Media-Obsessed Reality in Dystopian Fiction

Izabela Bełz-Kaczmarek University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland ibelz@wsiz.edu.pl

neuroculture, dystopian fiction, dopamine, escapism, digital addiction, semiotics

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging phenomenon of ***neuroculture*** and its reflection in contemporary dystopian fiction. It examines the intersection of neuroscience, psychology, and literature, focusing on how modern narratives portray society's increasing dependence on dopamine-driven stimuli such as social media, psychiatric medication, and consumerist distractions. Through analyzes of ***Brave New World*** by Aldous Huxley, ***Fahrenheit 451*** by Ray Bradbury, and ***My Year of Rest and Relaxation*** by Ottessa Moshfegh, the paper identifies patterns of escapism, passivity, and emotional withdrawal as central features of pleasure-oriented culture. The study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining semiotics and neurobiology to interpret dystopian literature as both a mirror and a warning signal of collective detachment and mental health crises in the digital age.

Introduction

It seems that humanity has never been more interested in psychology and neuroscience than it is nowadays. The reason may be that Maslow's pyramid has proven its truthfulness: Steven Pinker (2018), a cognitive psychologist and popular science author, argues in his book Enlightenment Now that humanity is experiencing unprecedented progress in areas such as health, safety, and longevity. He suggests that we have more reasons than ever to be optimistic about the human condition (Pinker, 2018, p. 51). This aligns with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943), which proposes that once basic physiological and safety needs are met, individuals can focus on psychological and self-fulfillment needs. Supporting this idea, Pinker (2018) notes that for most of human history, the average lifespan was around 30 years, whereas today it is approximately 71 years (p. 52). Yet, despite this progress, it is worth questioning whether such advancements truly translate into improved well-being. Even recent years marked by war and the COVID-19 pandemic appear comparatively mild when viewed through the lens of historical mortality. Although COVID-19 has had a profound global impact, with approximately 7 million deaths reported worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024), it pales in comparison to earlier pandemics. The bubonic plague of the fourteenth century is estimated to have claimed around 50 million lives across Europe (Benedictow, 2004), while the Spanish flu resulted in between 25 million and 50 million deaths globally. As Pinker (2018) emphasizes, such historical and statistical context illustrates the steady progress of humanity. This progress has allowed people to devote more attention to introspection and psychological well-being.

Yet, this raises an important question: Does this advancement in living conditions necessarily translate to improvements in mental health? The evidence suggests otherwise. Recent data indicate a significant increase in the number of scholarly publications on psychology and well-being, reflecting a growing academic interest in these topics. This trend appears to correlate with findings from the National Institute of Mental Health (2024), which report that one in five adults in the United States lives with a mental illness. Given the increasing global standardization of living conditions, it is reasonable to question whether similar mental health patterns are emerging across Europe and other parts of the world. In recent years, Poland, too, has witnessed an outbreak of a real epidemic of mental disorders. Between 1990 and 2009, the prevalence of mental disorders in the outpatient care system increased dramatically, by as much as 123% (from 1,629 to 3,638 per 100,000 population), and in inpatient care, by 51% (from 362 to 548 per 100,000 population) (Statistical Yearbook of the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, 2024). This rise is followed by an unprecedented number of all sorts of psychiatric drugs. Nowadays, more than 25% of American adults take a psychiatric drug on a daily basis. Prescriptions of numbing sedative medications like benzodiazepines, highly addictive, are also on the rise. Between 1996 and 2013 in the United States, the number of adults who received this form of medication rose by 67% percent, from 8.1 million to 13.5 million

(Lembke, 2021, pp. 38-39).

As we gain a deeper understanding of human biology, the natural course would be to ensure that people lead happier lives. Human happiness (however associated with economic prosperity) is one of the greatest aims the globalized world has decided to accomplish. As Harari puts it:

> If science is right and our happiness is determined by our biochemical system, then the only way to ensure lasting contentment is by rigging this system. Forget economic growth, social reforms and political revolutions: in order to raise global happiness levels we need to manipulate human biochemistry. (Harari, 2017, p. 45)

Theoretical Framework: From Neuroscience to Semiotics

It seems natural that people turn to literature which describes their problems and dilemmas. Both fiction and non-fiction, there is an undisputed rise in what we may call neuroliterature or a psycholiterary approach in literature. Their scope is broad, as psychology and neuroscience are paired with literature itself. Most academics are familiar with the concept of neurolinguistics. Neuroliterature may, however, not only examine the relationship between brain mechanisms and language but also provide us with a set of warnings which are easier to identify and acknowledge. Literature has never been created for the sake of literature because, according to Foucault, literature opens itself on the outside: whether it is philosophy, history, sociology, science in general or the future. In his short book entitled "The Thought From Outside," Foucault declares:

> It is a widely held belief that modern literature is characterized by a doubling back that enables it to designate itself. [...] In fact, the event that gave rise to what we called 'literature' is [...] a passage to the 'outside': language escapes the mode of being of discourse—in other words the dynasty of representation—and literary speech develops from itself, forming a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbors, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all. [...] Thought about thought, an entire tradition of wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to [...] the outside in which the speaking subject disappears. (Foucault, 1987, p. 12-13)

This is the place where, according to Seweryna Wysłouch, a literary scholar may need semiotics in order to „see literature as a system in the context of other systems". Hence, semiotics enables us to learn about cultural mechanisms and provides an opportunity to integrate other fields of the humanities. Semiotics, by its nature, is an interdisciplinary field of research, allowing a researcher to cross the boundaries of literature, broaden interpretative contexts, and read any work of literature anew (Wysłouch, 2001, p. 10).

Theories of literary studies do not seem to have addressed anything like the intersection of neuroscience and literature until now. The closest to this issue may be psychoanalysis, which, as Zofia Mitosek puts it, "at its starting point dealt with the structure of the human personality and its emotional stimuli" (Mitosek, 1998, p. 157). Scholars who turned to psychiatry and psychoanalysis tried to bring to light the covert hidden in the overt. It opened new interpretation possibilities; no wonder the method found numerous new enthusiasts. The method, however, posed a risk of narrowing discussions and attempting to reduce all plot situations to a few Freudian motives, such as the Oedipus complex and the fear of castration, whereas the sense of many works does not limit itself to the psychological dimension (Wysłouch, 2001, p. 15).

However, Freudian-inspired literary studies have primarily focused on uncovering the hidden and subconscious aspects of literature, rather than openly discussing the neurological aspects of the human psyche, largely because neurobiology is still a relatively new and developing field of study. On the other hand, there have been more than a hundred years of Freud's fundamental works, such as "Traumdeutung" (1899), "Metapsychologie" (1915) or "Das Ich und das Es" (1923) and the world, both academic and not, is somehow aware of many forces that drive us. Neuroliterature aims to explore the neurological mechanisms underlying human cognition and behavior. If a man is driven by primary instincts and fears, what is their source, and what are their implications? Neuroliterature is yet to be crystallized in the context of semiotics. This paper aims at identifying some of the relationships between human neuromechanisms and literary fiction, simultaneously grasping some of the Huxleyesque nature of the current

state of being, in a dopamine-driven world, attempting to characterize what we may call neuroculture and neuroliterature.

Dopamine, Escapism, and the New Dystopia

The adjective *Huxleyesque* inadvertently renders *Brave New World* (1932), a novel portraying a dystopian society under control, held mentally hostage not by terror, but by providing happiness and bliss. With „everybody's happy now" and other various mantras repeatedly pumped into young minds during their sleep, people in Aldous Huxley's world choose to be docile by taking soma, a drug that takes away all worries, stress and anger, providing nothing but thoughtless pleasure. A happy society is obedient, willing to choose contentment over a bad mood. However, a lingering feeling warns readers that this utopia is indeed a dystopia. Soma, however fictional, may bear some resemblance to serious and dangerous drugs that pose real threats to people, like cocaine, codeine, MDMA and others. To quote:

> Swallowing half an hour before closing time, that second dose of soma had raised a quite impenetrable wall between the actual universe and their minds.

Or:

> Lenina felt herself entitled, after this day of queerness and horror, to a complete and absolute holiday. As soon as they got back to the rest-house, she swallowed six half-gramme tablets of soma, lay down on her bed, and within ten minutes had embarked for lunar eternity. It would be eighteen hours at the least before she was in time again. (Huxley, 2004, p. 140)

In the novel, the drug was taken on a daily basis, it was used recreationally and in order not to provoke hallucinations but rather to escape from any negative feelings reality may provoke in the human mind. It was extremely addictive, yet widely acceptable, being a constant companion and a form of medication taken more often than vitamins. The purpose was to create a world of widespread contentment:

> Our world is not the same as Othello's world. You can't make flivvers without steel-and you can't make tragedies without social instability. The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get... And if anything should go wrong, there is soma. (Huxley, 2004, p. 220)

There is something alarming in how dystopian literature has foreshadowed the current state of mental being, approach, and lifestyle. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (2011) may be over 70 years old, but the way it portrays society is also oddly familiar to what we are experiencing nowadays. Bradbury presents a society that has replaced books and deeper thinking with easy, hollow entertainment. The author himself stated that by writing his novel, he intended to warn people against the useless information that television provided without sufficient context (Marshal, 2017). It is an important book that highlights the fact that not only totalitarian regimes pose a threat, but also the human tendency to seek a life as easy and pleasant as possible, while simultaneously avoiding responsibility. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the society's search for dopamine is the source of censorship and lack of freedom, because emotionally uncomfortable information is the source of distress, which people in the novel want to avoid at all costs, valuing numbness over the full spectrum of emotions. Children are treated as an unnecessary burden. The anti-intellectual majority is in control of the entire society. Mildred Montag, one of the protagonists of the novel, devoted her life to actually avoiding it, entertaining herself with a TV show ironically called *Family* and numbing herself, believing that lack of negativity would result in contentment. This numbness, however, is her motivation to sedate herself with sleeping pills (Bradbury, 2011).

Is escapism a new feature of neuroculture? This may indeed be the case, as suggested by Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), written before the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrator, a psychologically complex young woman, consciously chooses to detach herself from feelings, emotions, and the demands of everyday life. Although she is young, she lacks the will to engage with her reality and instead devises a plan to spend an entire year asleep, aided by a variety of medications. As she reflects on her state of disconnection, she notes:

> Every time I lay down... I went straight into black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness. I was neither scared nor elated in that space. I had no visions. I had no ideas... It was peaceful... There was no work to do, nothing I had to counteract or compensate for because there

> was nothing at all, period... I felt good. Almost happy. (Moshfegh, 2018, p. 38)

Both *Brave New World* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* value inaction over action. The characters, like Moshfegh's unnamed narrator and Huxley's Lenina, choose to distance themselves from the immediate context of reality. As the narrator admits: "Oh, sleep, nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness." (Moshfegh, 2018, p. 46). The act of withdrawing from reality into a state of emotional and cognitive void is portrayed as a safer alternative to confronting the complexities of consciousness. The protagonist firmly believes that emotional detachment and prolonged sleep offer greater security than experiencing the full spectrum of feelings that reality entails. This raises a critical question: What are the broader societal implications of such individual behaviors? Specifically, what kind of society emerges when individuals, like the narrator, collectively choose emotional disengagement as a coping mechanism?

Neuroculture and the Digital Condition

There is a drug, ostensibly somatically harmless. Like soma, it is something people get drugged by while escaping reality, believing this drug makes their lives more full of life at the same time. It is highly addictive, as it is based on dopamine release, with dopamine being responsible for human reward circuitry. This drug has a name: social media, with its endless possibilities of provoking dopamine highs and lows. While *Brave New World* is a novel, and soma is not a real drug, Huxley's dystopian society has never been closer. According to Anna Lembke, mobile devices with accompanying apps use the very same neural circuitry used by cocaine or slot machines in casinos. Unlike them, they are used by children as young as two. Unlike them, they are legal and accessible, handed down by parents.

This may sound like a shortcut to attention deficit disorder (ADD), another plague of the twenty-first century. It is now a widely discussed condition, frequently mentioned in the media and observed in schools and numerous other environments. Another cautionary narrative sheds light on the contemporary state of mental health: Bronwen Huska's *Accelerated* (2024), which, as the title suggests, moves at an extremely rapid pace. Fiction is followed by non-fiction with the recently published book *The Anxious Generation* (Haidt, 2024), which documents the consequences of shifting childhood into the virtual world—resulting in social anxiety, sleep deprivation, attention deficit disorder, and various forms of addiction. The book raises an alarming question: what kind of adults will emerge from such children?

One of the biggest risk factors for developing addiction to any substance is easy access to it. When a drug is easier to obtain, we are more likely to try it, and in trying it, we are more likely to become addicted. As Anna Lembke (2021, p. 18) notes, "One of the biggest risk factors for getting addicted to any drug is easy access to that drug." This observation may evoke associations with the Internet and the limitless possibilities it creates—and, unfortunately, with the compulsive consumption it promotes. Easy access to digital stimuli mirrors the mechanisms of addiction, from the increased availability of drugs to the normalization of risky online behaviors, including viral "challenges." Here, the semantics are more than apt: these behaviors are literally contagious, as humans—being social animals—tend to normalize certain patterns of behavior simply because others exhibit them (Lembke, 2021, p. 27). This dynamic is also reflected in the literary examples discussed above, such as the popularity of soma in *Brave New World* and the collective rush to annihilate intellectualism in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Before elaborating on the relationship between mobile devices, the Internet, and social media, it is essential to understand the mechanism of dopamine. At this point, literary scholars need to step beyond literature and engage with clinical psychiatry—demonstrating that, to analyze literature in a manner consistent with the pace of scientific development, they must continually acknowledge the interdisciplinary character of the human sciences, as provided by semiotics. At a certain level, there is no clear division between the humanities and the sciences. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter—a chemical messenger between neurons—first identified in 1957 by two scientists working independently: Arvid Carlsson from Sweden and Kathleen Montagu from Great Britain. It is involved in reward processing and motivation. Dopamine drives most behaviors essential for human survival, such as obtaining food, and it is also used to measure the addictive potential of substances or activities. The more dopamine a substance or situation

releases into the brain—and the faster it does so—the greater its addictive potential.

Moreover, the term *drug* may refer not only to medication but also to substances (such as sugar), activities, or habits. The adjective *high-dopamine* does not mean "containing high doses of dopamine" but rather "rapidly triggering high levels of dopamine" (Lembke, 2021, pp. 47–50). Another important aspect of the relationship between the human brain and dopamine is that any dopamine influx is followed by pain—a state that Lembke describes as "the pain of being," encompassing various negative feelings ranging from irritation to depression. Repeated exposure to pleasurable stimuli results in neuroadaptation—tolerance—which means that people require more of their drug of choice to achieve the same effect. Lembke (2021) also gives an example of one of her patients who was constantly immersed in a rain of distractions: music, YouTube, and Instagram. These were her so-called drugs of choice, leading to anxiety because her dopamine levels were continually being raised in the short term. Children are far more susceptible to such stimuli due to their limited experience and inability to self-regulate. Their understanding of delayed gratification is yet to develop. Mobile devices and five-second TikTok videos stand in complete opposition to self-awareness—a quality associated with a balanced and mindful state of mind.

One of the major *drugs of choice* nowadays is undoubtedly the use of mobile phones. These devices, designed to make life easier through intuitive interfaces, notifications, and applications, also have the ability to stimulate dopamine production. When we hear a ding or a short tone alerting us to a new text, email, or social media post, cells in our brains release dopamine—one of the neurotransmitters in the brain's reward circuitry. That dopamine makes us feel pleasure. The ping signals that a reward is waiting for us (Greenfield, 2015). Cognitive neuroscientists have demonstrated that rewarding social stimuli—smiling faces, messages from people we know or admire, gestures—activate dopaminergic reward pathways. Smartphones, which now number over two billion users worldwide, have an almost unlimited potential for dopamine stimulation. With every "like" on Instagram or Facebook notification, there is the potential for a positive social stimulus and a dopamine influx (Krach, Paulus, Bodden, & Kircher, 2010).

The average adult checks their phone between 50 and 300 times per day, and as shocking as it may sound, this mirrors the way citizens in *Brave New World* overdosed on soma. One cannot function in Huxleyesque society without soma—a society without negativity has no understanding of those who refuse to take the drug. Analogously, the absence from social media or lack of a mobile device may lead to digital and social exclusion. Soma is a potent drug that offers an ever-present escape from negativity. Whether it generates that negativity remains in the sphere of literary speculation. Similarly, Ottessa Moshfegh's narrator seeks numbness through pills, and Mildred from *Fahrenheit 451* overdoses on sedatives. Yet it does not take tragic plots to illustrate the effects that dopamine cravings have on society

Following the identification of the key characteristics of a neuro-centred and dopamine-driven dystopian society, a critical question arises concerning its broader implications. These features include a pervasive avoidance of reality, the pursuit of instant gratification through effortless entertainment, increasing passivity, a diminishing willingness to engage in creative activities, widespread social and emotional withdrawal, and a growing reliance on pharmacological interventions. Together, these tendencies suggest a societal shift toward numbing rather than confronting discomfort, raising concerns about the long-term consequences of such behavioral patterns.

Conclusion

All this can lead people to overlook the fact that such a state makes them easier to control. Moreover, external control imposes itself—a passive and indifferent society expects to be guided and patronized, as this also means that responsibility can be relocated onto someone else, whether the government or global corporations. Being in charge of one's own life implies freedom, but freedom requires responsibility, and responsibility requires effort. The question is: are these features not easily identifiable in today's society? As Aldous Huxley observed in *Brave New World Revisited*:

The development of a vast mass communications industry, concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal, the more or less totally irrelevant, failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions. (Huxley, 2004, p. 45)

Literature has once again proven capable of foreseeing the contemporary condition. Some may fail or refuse to acknowledge this because the most popular dystopia of all time, Orwell's *1984*, did not literally come true. Neil Postman (1986) noted that people lost their vigilance after Orwell's prophecy failed to materialize:

When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares. (p. 155)

People have imposed on themselves an obligation to be constantly entertained and— as both literature and neuroscience suggest—this, paradoxically, is a shortcut to misery. Despite the growing awareness of the detrimental effects of social media and mobile phones on collective mental health, the Internet continues to evolve, making information increasingly accessible, scattered, and fragmented, while also reducing the demands on engagement. In other words, short video forms are now the most popular means of communication, and this trend is likely to persist in the near future. The Amplify Platform reports that reels were the best-reaching format and the most popular type of online content in 2023 (Gwóźdź, 2023).

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Posthuman Metafiction: Construction of Dystopia through Narrative Strategies in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Areena Zaman Bodla Forman Christian College, A Liberal Arts University, areena.zaman5@gmail.com

dystopia, posthumanism, non-linear narrative, metafiction, identity

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative strategies in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). It examines how Vonnegut employs non-linear structure, metafiction, and posthuman narration to reimagine identity, agency, and the human condition in a dystopian world. Drawing on Zhang Na's concept of posthuman narrative developed in *Posthuman Becoming Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Science Fiction*, the study integrates narratology with posthuman theory to analyze the dissolution of human-centered perspectives. Zhang's framework emphasizes narratives that lack self-maintenance and evolve through the reader's engagement, reflecting a relational and hybrid form of subjectivity. Using discourse analysis, the paper demonstrates how Vonnegut's text disrupts traditional humanist assumptions by blurring the boundaries between human and non-human experience, realism and metafiction, and individual and collective identity. The research contributes to current discussions on posthumanism by showing how dystopian fiction redefines the human in technologically mediated and politically unstable contexts, offering new ways to conceptualize existence beyond essentialist paradigms.

Introduction

The paper aims to explore the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative strategy in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* published in 1969. Literary narratives serve as a space to redefine societal formation, individual identity and the social structures within a piece of work. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* records the life experiences of the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, along with the changing perception of reality and individual identity of characters in the backdrop of war and violence. The novel spans different time periods, encompassing Billy's childhood memories, life in Dresden, post-war experiences in America, and his visit to the planet Tralfamadore. The story is narrated in a non-linear or a stream of consciousness pattern and focuses on the negative experiences of war on the psyche and behaviors of the characters within the novel. This research conducts a narrative analysis of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to depict the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative strategies that challenge the traditional humanist narratives in the novel.

The research applies Zhang Na's concept of posthuman narratives as elucidated in her book *Posthuman Becoming Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Science Fiction*. Zhang Na (2018) explores the concept of posthuman narrative, arguing that the integration of narratology with posthumanism exemplifies various aspects of posthuman metamorphosis and ideology. She highlights narrative as reflecting posthumanism by its "lack of self-maintenance intention and how self evolves through readers' reading so that it forges beneficial relations with others" (p. 7). The concept posits that posthuman narratives are embedded and constructed within a framework of narratives marked by the presence of non-human spatial patterns, independent of any individual perspective. Thus, Na's concept of posthuman narrative offers a deeper understanding of the narrative techniques employed in Vonnegut's novel, highlighting how these techniques contribute to the construction of dystopia within the novel.

Zhang Na introduced the posthuman becoming of the narrative and how narrative structures exemplify posthumanism within their construction, highlighting a world that is cognitively estranged from individuals. According to Na, the narrative involves posthuman hybridity that deconstructs the inherent binary oppositions present in the text and is marked with a non-linear pattern of narration that creates a sense of confusion and dystopia in the story. For instance, in the first chapter of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator is describing his process of writing a novel through a realistic perspective, but the process turns out

to be the reality of the text as the narrator is revealed to be one of the characters in the narrative of his novel. Thus, the narrative challenges the traditional distinctions between reality and illusion as well as human and non-human reflecting posthuman hybridity and chaos in the text. The novel presents a tragic picture of World War II, where humans suffer loss of agency and individuality and are constantly pushed into a state of confusion and dystopia. According to Robert Tally "humane fatalism of *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests one way of looking at the disjointed, often painful, experience of social life in the United States in the twentieth century" (2011, p. 85). The novel is a representation of society that links all living and dead matters in the world. David Porush (1985) in *The Soft Machine* highlights that Vonnegut "experiments with the structure of novelistic presentation" (p. 86). The author employs a war context to convey the destructive sense of a world where boundaries are blurred and individuals have fluid identities. Na defines this fluidity and chaos as a result of the disruption of "humanist dichotomies by adding more hybrid subjects into the self/other opposition, and brings back the all-too-human humanity to the chaotic world of presence" (2018, p. 9). Hence, the novel negates the traditional authoritarian intervention and dichotomies ultimately presenting a society that is characterized by pain, suffering and a dystopian sense of the world.

In addition to war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* reflects time as a controlling factor through Billy's character, who is able to switch between time and space. Christina Jarvis (2003) asserts that the time travel in the text juxtaposes the bombings of Dresden (p. 65). However, this research argues that Vonnegut portrays Billy as a posthuman subject who can navigate between past, present, and future as a means of escaping the harsh reality of society. Billy notes that "all moments, past and future, always have existed, always will exist" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 12), reflecting the absurd reality and repetition of chaotic events, thereby constructing a dystopia marked by human misery within the narrative. Similarly, Donna Haraway (1985/2016) suggests the posthuman sense of narration alters the boundaries of spatial perception for all individuals. As Harold Bloom (2007) notes that the novel describes a "new mode of perception that radically alters traditional conceptions of time and morality" (p. 5). Thus, the spatial and temporal metaphor in *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrates that all moments are present simultaneously, reiterating the repetition of events that contribute to the dystopian nature of the novel. Moreover, Vonnegut, through the narrative strategy of posthuman mortality and myth, constructs a dystopia reflecting the miserable human condition in a society. Posthuman myth narrative constructs the posthuman subjectivity and criticizes hegemonic realistic notions. Zhang Na reflects that as a "tool for the survival, the posthuman myth narrative is deployed to elucidate the posthuman becoming" of the narrative (2018, p. 11). This is evident in the novel as there is parody of realism eventually reflecting the posthuman narrative. Realism presents narrative as linear, chronological, and liberal humanist, allowing for the possibility of free will and responsible moral choice. However, the narrative technique used by the author implies that events like Dresden refute such liberal assumptions and Tralfamadore is, in fact, a posthuman myth promised upon a rejection of the philosophical assumptions of realism and moral choice, consequently reflecting a posthuman dystopia through narrative construction, marked with the absence of an individual's free will and central human subjectivity in society.

Hence, this paper aims to explore the construction of dystopia through narrative strategy in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* by carrying out a discourse analysis of the novel. The study also unpacks multiple interpretations of the text through the theoretical framework of posthuman narratives, examining how posthuman strategies in the novel challenge traditional humanist assumptions and construct a dystopian vision. The research objectives are to analyze how Vonnegut's use of posthuman narrative and metafiction deconstructs linear storytelling and represents dystopia, how the non-linear structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* shapes posthuman subjectivity and identity, and how the motifs of mortality and myth disrupt conventional techniques of narration. These objectives are framed by the broader aim of understanding how posthuman narrative strategies reconfigure the relationship between humanist and posthuman discourses. The research questions address how Kurt Vonnegut employs narrative strategies to deconstruct linear narrative and reflect the formation of dystopia within the narrative construction of the novel. It explores how the non-linear narrative of Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse-Five constructs dystopia with greater power and how it shapes the characters' posthuman experiences and subjectivities within the narrative of the text. How does Kurt Vonnegut critique humanist ideologies through posthuman narrative techniques in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* and what implications does this have for understanding the dystopian construction of the world in the novel?

The research is delimited to the discourse analysis of Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, which serves as the primary source. The research focuses on the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative strategy in the text. This is accomplished by using Zhang Na's concept of posthuman narratives, which is elucidated in her book *Posthuman Becoming Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Science Fiction*. Narratology as a method is employed to explore multiple narrative levels in the novel. It helps analyze the non-linear narrative structure in the novel, challenging traditional notions of space and time. Through narratology and posthuman narrative strategy, the research explores Billy's experiences, the author's voice and the Tralfamadorians' perspective.

Posthumanism and Narrative Discourse

This section reviews the existing literature on the concept of posthumanism, posthumanist narrative construction and highlights how the idea of posthumanism evolved over time. It also reviews the literature on the primary text *Slaughterhouse-Five* and thus, helps to trace the topic of this research within a larger context.

Posthumanism is the interconnectedness of human beings with the non-human or other forms of life that has its traces in the tribal myths and folklore of Asian, Native American and African subcontinents. In the Oxford Dictionary, posthumanism is defined as a "mode of thinking about the intersecting human, nonhuman, and technological worlds" that has become prominent in the late twentieth century, largely due to ecological campaigns that question the position of humans in relation to the natural environment (n.p.). The term posthumanism is a combination of post and humanism. Post indicates a subsequent phase and humanism refers to a philosophical movement that focuses on human values and experiences. Hence, posthumanism transcends humanistic notions, reflecting an evolving understanding of existence, cultural shifts, and technological advancements in terms of individual identity.

Historically, posthumanism as a theory draws on the critique of Eurocentric humanism, reevaluating the humanistic myth of human beings as the centre of the universe and their attitude toward other forms of life. It shares certain commonalities with antihumanism, which decenters human agency to demonstrate how all matter co-evolves and is mutually dependent on one another. Posthumanism is generally associated with the works of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser (1961), which reflect the inherent instability of humanism. In his *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault talks about the history and concept of insanity to correct the rational accounts of psychiatry. Similarly, Althusser in *For Marx* notes that "myth of Man is reduced to ashes" (1996, p. 229) by science and materialism, simultaneously showing the inherent instability of human nature. Therefore, posthumanism as a theory explores the multiplicity and inherent instability of humanism, as well as the defined human existence of individuals within a society. According to Cary Wolfe (2003), in *Animal Rites*, Western humanism is dependent on the hierarchical binary opposition between human and animal. He asserts that human freedom, regardless of gender, class and race, has its possibility in "absolute control over the lives of nonhuman others" (Wolfe, 2003, p. 7). Hence, in the light of Wolfe's argument, posthumanism, unlike traditional humanist thought, rejects the binary oppositions and advocates for the co-existence of humans with non-humans in society.

Posthumanism also examines the co-existence of humans with technology, artificial intelligence and explores how these concepts impact the notion of selfhood and hegemonic social order among individuals in the world. Donna J. Haraway, in her "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), highlights that interconnected boundary breakdowns have transformed the long-established and dominant figure of the human into a cyborg. She says that in "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (Haraway, 1985, p. 66). Similarly, Katherine Hayles, in *How We Become Posthuman* (1999), traces the historical trajectory of posthumanism and highlights the impact of digital technology on an individual's identity. She stresses posthuman subjectivity that focuses on the interplay

between technology and biology, hence challenging traditional distinctions. This study helps me analyze the interconnection of humans with non-humans in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* that challenges the traditional distinctions ultimately promoting a posthuman subjectivity in the text.

However, in *Our Posthuman Future*, the political theorist Fukuyama argues that the contemporary distancing from humanism is a threat to human existence as the individual's existence is a "meaningful concept, and has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species" (2002, p. 7). Thus, the concept of posthumanism is reflected as a negative case that transcends moral boundaries and is synonymous with the lack of humanism. For Fukuyama, the factor X which is the essence of humanity, is compromised by a technological and digitised environment. Pepperell (2003) also states that posthumanism is a form of anti-humanism which is reevaluated by modern science. For a long time, individuals tried to develop and control technology in an attempt to be superior to all the species. However, this superiority is now being challenged by the very technologies that man has created and it seems that the "dominance between human and machine is slowly shifting" (Pepperell, 2003, p. 3). Hence, posthumanism on one hand, does destabilize the hierarchical boundaries but on the other hand, it also leads to a future that is overpowered by commercial, digitized and technological advancements.

Similarly, in recent times, posthuman thinkers have used this concept to state a hybrid culture marked by multiple notions of posthuman existence. Livingston and Halberstam in *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) argue that their research aims to address the challenges faced by a coherent human body. They bring into light the argument that posthuman is a state that "collapses into sub-, inter-, trans-, pre-, anti" states (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, p. 8). It can be asserted that posthuman bodies and subjectivities are the result of postmodern relations of power and its consequences. On the contrary, Neil Badmington inquires whether posthumanism is antagonistic towards theory and human existence, highlighting that it is a "working-through of humanist discourses" (2003, p. 22). Elaine Graham (2002) shares Badmington's views that posthumanism studies the notion of otherness by drawing upon narratives from within literature. She examines the representation of post-human, including monsters and aliens, to discuss the ethical implications of technological and scientific change.

Nevertheless, Singer and Rorty (1989) argue that moral concerns should extend beyond human life to a non-biological moral sense, a significant aspect of posthumanism. Thus, the strength of this research lies in its portrayal of posthumanism as evolving beyond the biological ethical and moral implications towards a posthuman scientific discourse. Similarly, in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour criticizes the traditional distinction between society and nature, ultimately advocating a posthuman perspective marked by the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities. Rosi Braidotti's (2013) notion of posthumanism focuses on the importance of embracing interconnectedness and multiplicity and argues for a post-anthropocentric politics that gives due importance to the diverse forms of life beyond human-centric perspectives. However, the weakness of this research lies in the fact that it does not address the condition and situation of human beings in a highly advanced and post-anthropocentric world.

Posthumanism is a vast field that includes various concepts and sub-categories within its definition. Stefan Sorgner and Robert Ranisch (2015) state that posthumanism is used as an umbrella term that includes both critical posthumanism and transhumanism. Critical posthumanism "rejects both human exceptionalism and human instrumentalism (that humans have a right to control the natural world)" (qtd. in Latorra, 2011, p. 533), whereas transhumanism focuses on humans as the centre of the universe, but it also considers technology as a part of human progress. Heidegger's (1977) ideas on nature and technology are significant to contemporary theories of posthumanism. Heidegger's idea of enframing presents a critical perspective on technology, treating it as a process rather than an artefact. Heidegger (1977) rightly claims that the "essence of technology is by no means anything technological" (p. 13). He reflects that enframing reveals how technology is a process of uncovering specific modes of being, leading to a pessimistic view of technology. Hence, since its inception, posthumanism has become a major site of discussion in contemporary times due to the erosion of human agency, as well as the notion that human centrality is no longer a convincing account of

the way the world works.

Posthuman narrative construction plays an important role within the field of literature in defining a narrative that is characterized by posthumanist thoughts and techniques. In this regard, Michel Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) has influenced the posthumanist thought. His examination of discourses and power structures led to the analysis of how knowledge and language shape our understanding of the human and non-human, ultimately contributing to posthumanist critiques within the narrative construction. Manuel De Landa, in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (2000), examines the non-anthropocentric view of history, exploring the evolution of human societies alongside non-human entities. He stresses an evolved understanding of history that considers the agency of both human and non-human factors, challenging traditional human-centric historical narratives.

In Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis (2013), Herbrechter provides an analysis of posthumanism, addressing key challenges within the field. The research explores implications of posthumanist thought on identity, ethics and the future of humanity, ultimately offering insights into the contradictions and complexities inherent in posthumanist narrative discourse. This research helps analyze the relationship between posthumanism and identity formation as well as how the posthuman narrative constructs dystopia in the text. Hence, posthumanism creates a sphere of responsibility that focuses on a crucial philosophical and sociological imperative.

Similarly, Jacques Derrida explains the ethical imperative by drawing attention to the notion of undecidability. There would be no decision in politics, ethics and thus, no responsibility due to undecidability. Derrida (1944) reflects that decision with conscious knowledge of taking it would not be a decision at all, rather it would be the "consequence of a premiss, and there would be no problem, there would be no decision. Ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability" (p. 66). This research is significant as it assesses how posthumanist narrative is characterized by undecidability that reflects ambivalence over the idea of transcending boundaries. Miskimmon (2014), in *Strategic Narratives: Communication, Power and the New World Order*, rightly claims that narrative informs how political participants and social actors comprehend and engage with one another ultimately creating meaning, expectations, organizing the plot, and framing the crisis.

Scholarly debates on posthuman narratives problematize human-centric positions, confronting if non-human intelligences can be conceptualized as non-humanistic, challenging human and non-human binaries. The posthumanist narrative, thus, moves beyond the human centrality to think through diverse narratives while reducing the impact of humanity. According to Grove, counter-narratives of Anthropocene move toward eco-centric possibilities that de-center the human and the authors write in order to "sketch out what possibilities I think might exist in the terrain of the apocalypse" (p. 229). Nevertheless, Bakker (2013) argues that post-anthropocentric or posthumanist narrative would abolish the human subject. Disconnection of the human from intention, volition and rationality, associated with it involves seeking that which is outside the perspectives of human and non-human relations and ultimately results in disconnected human-centrism. According to Kopnina (2020), posthuman narratives critique speciesism and focus on deprioritizing human centrism to replace the view that humans are superior and separate from other forms of life. Therefore, posthumanist narratives prioritize inter-species co-evolution and co-production, challenging the legitimacy of human-centric binaries such as human/animal, mind/body, and nature/culture existing in a society.

In light of the books, journals, and articles discussed above, multiple theorists have examined the idea, history, construction, and current status of posthumanism in a variety of contexts. Previous research highlights the socio-cultural and technological aspects of posthumanism, as well as the relationship between narrative discourse and posthumanism. Revisiting the literature on posthuman studies shows how there exist different notions and aspects of posthumanist thought, ranging from undermining binary oppositions, stress on fluidity of existence and the co-existence of human and non-human matter, thus reaffirming the relevance of posthuman studies in the contemporary milieu.

Lynn Buck, in "Vonnegut's World of Comic Futility", explores the creation of the world and characters in the novel. She suggests Vonnegut's "deliberate mechanization of mankind" (Buck, 2014, p. 2) and the cynicism of the comical world that he has created. The research shows

how Vonnegut's world diminishes the man-centered notions about the universe and reflects the fluidity of individual identity and existence in the text. Robert Merrill (1978) in "Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: the requirements of chaos," argues that it is safe to assume that novels are a product of social protests and hence, are not written by nihilists. Thus, Vonnegut's early and late novels are written in the spirit of social protest. However, this research does not address how the text also serves as a space to move beyond the traditional human-centric narratives to a more metafictional narration within the broader framework of posthumanist discourse.

In "*Slaughterhouse-Five*: Time out of Joint", Edelstein (1974) explores the psychological impact of the sci-fi world on the characterization of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, and how his psyche is affected by it. This research thus helps to analyze the psychological state of protagonist Billy in a highly destructive environment and how it contributes to the creation of a dystopian world. The novel employs techniques such as interior monologues and juxtapositions to illustrate the fragmentation of human life. These strategies also serve to satirize the mechanisms of power and authority operating within society. Fengyuan Zheng (2023) in "The incapability of time and history in *Slaughterhouse-Five*" notes the time-travelling experience of Billy in the text and explores the relationship between this spatial travel and nostalgia within the novel. The research reflects how the time and spatial travel pave the way for the protagonist to recall his childhood experiences, as well as a way to distance oneself from the broader harsh realities, such as the experience of war, in the novel.

As a whole, the previous existing literature on Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* reflects the mechanization of individuals and how the novel is a social product criticizing the authoritarian structures and the abuse of power in society. The research also highlights how the narrative unfolds as well as the protagonist's nostalgia within the novel. However, the existing scholarships do not take into account the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative techniques in the novel. Thus, the construction of dystopia through posthuman narrative strategy offers a viable research gap to be explored in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Non-Linear Narrative Technique and Dystopia

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* explores the nature and complexities of posthuman discourse ultimately reflecting posthuman narrative strategies that contribute in the construction of dystopia within the novel. Vonnegut in his novel uses the posthuman narrative strategies that challenge traditional humanist narratives. It also challenges the distinction between reality and fiction within narrative construction in order to present a dystopian vision of the world. According to Robert Tally (2011), the "humane fatalism of *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests one way of looking at the disjointed, often painful, experience of social life in the United States in the twentieth century" (p. 85). Hence, the novel explores the fatal aspects of human existence and constructs a dystopia through its posthuman narrative strategy in order to reflect the plight of individuals in a society.

The posthuman narrative is characterized by its lack of self-maintenance intention and a non-linear narrative in order to highlight the tragic experiences and confusion of the characters withina text. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses non-linear narration to tell the story of the life experiences of protagonist Billy involving his imprisonment during war in Dresden, post-war life in America and his visit to planet Tralfamadore. This non-linear narration and chaotic time-space aspect shows the posthuman dystopic world in which Billy is confused and is constantly trying to make sense of the world. Billy has been "unstuck in time" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 10) and jumps from present to the past and future as an attempt to cope with the inhuman war and dystopian world experiences that have affected him seriously. Hence, the linear plot is abandoned as Billy moves into the past and present without warning, showing the fragmentation of man's identity and the construction of a dystopia that is filled with destruction, loneliness, and traumatic experiences of individuals because of war.

According to Zhang Na in *Posthuman Becoming Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Science Fiction*, the "narrative exemplifies posthumanism by its lack of self-maintenance intention and self-evolves through readers' readings so that it forges beneficial relations with others" (2018, p. 7). In first chapter of the novel, the narrator is describing his process of writing novel

through realistic points but the process turns out to be the reality of the text as the narrator is revealed to be one of the characters in the narrative of his novel. The narrator, while anticipating the climax of story, says that "American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 4). As a reader, one expects the climax of novel to be the same but this climax is never actualized since posthuman narrative denaturalizes the notion of realistic climax and deconstructs self-maintenance narration ultimately constructing a sense of dystopia with the blurring of realistic and fictional narrative intention.

The science fiction and dystopian texts undermine the traditional plot, characterization and setting of the novel. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* through its discontinuous presentation of narrative construction does not consider the individual consciousness of the author as authentic rather it allows the readers to produce a multiplicity of meanings. In narratology, the interplay between narrative and the author in a text is a metafictional device, therefore, Vonnegut's novel reflects the authorial voice as abstract that undermines objectivity and allows various interpretations of the text. For instance, the Statue of Liberty is a symbol of American magnificence but in the text this symbolism is inverted as the statue rather than grandeur shows the dark reality of American society since, the model of statue is put in a corner where "hundreds of books about fucking and buggery and murder" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 86) are also placed. The different layers of narration are juxtaposed so that no single, linear, logical sequence of events can be traced. The reader is also in a constant mood of suspense and uncertainty confronted with disillusionment as the narrative itself is fragmented. Such a posthuman narrative triggers the sense of undecidability in Derridean terms and points to the fact that narrative itself is something arbitrary that pluralizes its interpretations in various situations based on the layer surfaced through the viewpoints of thoughtful readers. Hence, the variety of meanings denaturalize human centrality and narrative continuity representing the posthuman dystopia marked with the absence of human centrality and agency within the novel.

Moreover, according to Zhang Na, in the posthuman becoming narrative, any single character in the novel is reduced to the status of a tiny molecule. She notes that this "zoomed-out perspective makes the humans witness an abandoned existence like a face drawn on the beach erased by nonhuman forces" (Na, 2018, p. 9). Most of Vonnegut's characters are also reduced to insignificance in the wake of broader socio-political structures that the characters face. For instance, Billy is reduced to a mere robot directed by external forces such as aliens, natural disasters and war. He has no control over his life and has the fantasy of Tralfamadore in order to escape from the cruelty of war. His characterization shows the negative consequences of the Second World War, and how it affected the characters' psyche as "Weary felt, and Billy was going to pay" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 48). Billy's weariness and angst are caused by the events during the bombing of Dresden that have made him lost control over the life. At one moment he's a prisoner of war and another moment he's back in his childhood in New York. The narrator notes that "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 10). Thus, the protagonist adopts this non-singular notion of time as a defense mechanism to rationalize the terrible experience of war.

Through fluctuating time and space, Billy detaches himself from the material world and gets into a world far away from the reality in Dresden. Hence, the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* give a zoomed-out perspective and through posthuman narrative strategy of unreliable spatial and non-linear narration are reflected as insignificant within narrative discourse ultimately constructing a dystopia in which individuals are confronted with a highly controlled, destructive and insignificant existence.

Temporal Dimension and Posthuman Mortality as a Narrative Strategy

In Vonnegut's novel, Billy is portrayed as fragmented and suffering in a dystopian world through narrative techniques that explore temporal dimension and posthuman mortality. Billy is in various spaces and times that give him the chance to go through his birth, death, and World War II experiences. According to critic Jarvis (2003), Billy's fragmentation is "apparent physically and mentally as a result of the cruel experience of war" (p. 88). Thus, Vonnegut makes Billy capable of travelling through time, which ultimately makes Billy more than a human and hence resorts to the idea of

posthuman subjectivity.

The temporal dimension within the narrative construction also provides readers with a vivid picture of wartime experiences, highlighting both the technological and social dystopias within the novel. Billy recalls his experiences, which include time travel and visits to the planet of Tralfamadore, where "there is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 88). As Mustazza (2011) observes, Billy's experiences — surviving the bombing of Dresden, returning home emotionally detached, marrying without love, raising children, and becoming unstuck in time — highlight the narrative's critique of humanist assumptions and its construction of dystopia. Thus, the temporal dimension is crucial for understanding Billy's conflicted existence, which marks the construction of a posthuman dystopia within the text.

The temporal dimension is synonymous with a distorted and chaotic sense of self and existence. According to Zhang Na (2018), the "Chinese-box spatial pattern indicates a fractured self into multiple layers with identical but distorted existences" (p. 19). Throughout the novel, Billy blends time, and there is no distinction between past, present, and future. Being unstuck in time in reality is the manifestation of duality and fragmentation in character, as Billy experiences trauma from the memories of the destructive bombing of Dresden. This is also one of the reasons why it is difficult for the reader to determine Billy's location at any given time in the novel. Thus, the space or time fluctuation technique reflects how Billy is hesitating between the present and the past with no control over his actions that emphasize the absurd dystopian world and existence.

The concept of memory plays an important role in posthuman narrative strategies. Na suggests that the notion of posthuman memory is not contrived; rather, it is based on the "posthuman's embodied and embedded pre-experience as a human being before metamorphosis" (2018, p. 8). This memory with a different embedding is often harsh and traumatic for the posthuman to recollect; however, for becoming posthuman, the "memory of being is remembered (Na, 2018, p. 8). The novel's narrative structure gives due importance to the memory or experience of pre-posthuman existence, which becomes a means of liberation from the destructive world.

The novel's narrative structure is similar to Henri Bergson's concept of memory, in which all moments coexist in concentrated forms. Memories closer to the "present consciousness seem more concrete, concentrated into easily recognizable images; more distant memories are more disparate, fuzzier" (Bergson, p. 13). Billy recalls his memory of being human before his metamorphosis into a posthuman subjectivity, in which he is more than human, thus capable of travelling through spaces like those of the Tralfamadorians. The narrator observes that "he has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 10). Thus, Billy recalls his experiences and memories of being a human in the traditional sense, which provide him with comfort and solace. Although the technique of posthuman memory provides liberation or a sense of posthuman metamorphosis to the character, yet through this narrative technique, there is also the repetition of the devastating events of war, chaos and confusion, ultimately constructing a posthuman dystopia in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The posthuman mortality as a narrative technique contributes to the construction of dystopia within the novel. Zhang Na asserts that "posthuman mortality is the climax of the posthuman becoming narrative, which releases the strongest generative vitality for the next cycle of life in a becoming-imperceptible manner rather than being obsessed with the immortality of this being" (2018, p. 8). In the novel, Billy gives a speech in a baseball stadium in Chicago in which he predicts his own death and proclaims that "if you think death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I've said" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 89). Thus, it illustrates the concept of posthuman mortality and Billy's disinterest in life.

However, the fact that Billy is killed immediately after the speech reflects both the posthuman vision of the next cycle of life and the pettiness of human life, constructing a dystopia through the narrative strategy employed within the novel. The posthuman mortality narrative is also "permeated with the apocalyptic hope for the redemption of the chaotic human world through the posthuman's self-sacrifice as a scapegoat" (Na, 2018, p. 8). This is evident in the text when Billy says that when a person dies, "he is still very much

alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 26). Thus, posthuman narrative is an embodiment of the world and denies the traditional notion of existence, while also constructing a posthuman dystopia within the narrative of the text, where individual life is treated as insignificant, trivial, and secondary to all the broader structures and non-human matter present in society.

Disruption of Humanist Dichotomies and Posthuman Dystopia

The posthumanist narrative involves the disruption of humanist dichotomies by incorporating a hybrid perspective into the narrative, thereby creating a dystopia. Na (2018) states that the "emergence of the embodied and embedded posthuman disrupts the humanist dichotomies by adding more hybrid subjects into the self/other opposition" (p. 29). In the novel's narrative, the self vs. other binary is undermined by the analogy drawn between more-than-human Tralfamadorians and the Nazi soldiers. On his daughter's wedding night, Billy is kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians, who take him to their planet and put him in a zoo. Billy asks them, "Why me?" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 55), which is reminiscent of a question that an American soldier asks to a German soldier who is beating him in chapter six of the novel, to which he replies, "Why you? Why anybody?" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 66). This question expands to the chaotic and destructive sense of the world, inducing thoughts as to why Dresden, why have all these wars? According to Bloom (2007), "whether from the Tralfamadorians or the German, the answer to the question of why is the same, although the Tralfamadorians are more thorough and more explicit in answering" (p. 39). This analogy drawn between the Tralfamadorians and the Germans also highlights the inhumane consequences of accepting a posthuman dystopia, as a lack of personal responsibility leads to destruction. This highlights the dilution of the boundary between Tralfamadorians and humans, showing both as interrelated along with the resultant chaos of the interrelatedness, hence, reflecting the posthuman dystopia within the narrative construction of the novel.

Furthermore, another posthuman characterization of narrative is its blurring of boundaries between reality and illusion as well as truth vs. falsity. The novel's narrative engagement with the idea of free will blurs the oppositions between truth and falsity or illusion and reality. It is generally understood that people are free to choose their own fate and that their actions bring a change in determining the future, but to Billy's dismay, he discovers that an individual's destiny is decided by external factors. He questions the Tralfamadorians about human free will and says that "If humans have free will, what then is the purpose of their brutal actions, like the bombing of Dresden during World War II" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 58). Billy even asks the Tralfamadorians if they can stop the universe from being destroyed, to which they reply, "We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 55). Billy realizes that the idea of free will is an illusion and that we are always monitored by some source of entity – dystopia- in the world. Hence, the idea of free will is more blurred reflecting the posthuman dystopia in which individuals are reduced to the status of robots and treated as mechanized beings where each action is already planned and controlled by some authoritarian or more than human entity.

Similarly, wars deceive young people since they cannot understand the reality. Billy is a man who is deceived by the war and machines. His harsh existence becomes a metaphor for individuals living in an absurd and cruel world which controls its people through systematic oppression. When Billy sees the Americans shaved, he is shocked at their age and says "My God, it's the Children's Crusade!" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 46). Thus, within narrative construction. Vonnegut highlights war as a controlling system that manipulates people's mind. Billy even expects the Tralfamadorians to "fear that the Earthling combination of ferocity and spectacular weaponry might eventually destroy part or maybe all of the innocent Universe" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 50). Thus, through the posthuman hybridity and by the blurring of real vs. illusory existence of Billy, Vonnegut's narrative questions the very existence and humiliation of individuals in a society, eventually constructing a vision of dystopia.

Posthuman Myth and Metamorphosis as a Strategy to Construct Dystopia

Posthuman narrative involves the posthuman myth and parody that leads to sustaining a posthumanist thought. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a parodic perspective of "science fiction and war documentary" is presented

(Hutcheon, 2005, p. 44). Zhang Na (2018) notes that "posthuman myth is the pastiche, parody or revision of the Western central myth (p. 10). The parody of science fiction employed in the narrative structure revises the Western myth of progress and technology. The key point here is that neither of these two generic qualities of science fiction nor war documentary is preferred; rather, there is the problematization of myths as metanarratives, highlighting the poshuman world's uncertainty and suspension of centrality, ultimately creating a dystopian world without human subjectivity.

Similarly, posthuman myth narrative constructs the posthuman subjectivity. Zhang Na reflects that "as a tool for the posthuman's survival, the posthuman myth narrative is deployed to elucidate the posthuman becoming" of the narrative (2018, p. 11). This is evident in the novel as there is a parody of realism, eventually reflecting the posthuman narrative. Realism presents narrative as linear, chronological, liberal humanist thought, allowing for the possibility of free will and responsible moral choice. However, the novel implies that events like Dresden refute such liberal assumptions and Tralfamadore is, in fact, a posthuman myth promised upon a rejection of the philosophical assumptions of realism and moral choice, consequently reflecting posthumanism and a dystopic world marked with the absence of an individual's free will and central human subjectivity. Zhang Na describes the notion of posthuman metamorphosis as a narrative strategy within the posthuman discourse by which there is the formation of posthuman subjectivity. She highlights that the "posthuman metamorphosis is the very process of the becoming posthuman in various embodied and embedded becoming-others" (Na, 2018, p. 14). By including the elements of the other into the self, the self gets otherized and the narrative thus blurs the boundary between the other and the self.

It results in the collapse of humanist thinking of dualism, and there is a retrieval of agency against any artificially imposed boundaries. This posthuman metamorphosis is achieved by a Transworld identity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim reflects this Transworld identity as he is "taken through a time warp" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 26) by the Tralfamadorians so that he can be on Tralfamadore for years, and still be away from Earth for only a microsecond. Hence, Billy, through his time travelling, acquires a more than human or transworld identity, highlighting the posthuman metamorphosis technique of the narrative in order to form a posthuman subjectivity and dystopia without the traditional, central, and humanistic definition of a human being. This posthuman metamorphosis leads to the destruction of traditional human as one loses individuality and a centralized status. Hence, the posthuman narrative technique highlights the lack of human agency and individuality marked with surveillance, control and destruction, ultimately constructing a posthuman dystopia in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Conclusion

As a whole, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* challenges traditional humanist narratives and constructs a dystopia through the posthuman narrative strategies employed in the novel. Through the lens of Zhang Na's posthuman becoming narrative, the research highlights how a non-linear and non-singular narrative, marked by the multiplicity of ideologies, posthuman myth, temporal dimensions, fragmentation of identities, posthuman memory, hybridity, and posthuman mortality, constructs a dystopia within Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The character Billy's experiences of World War II and non-linear narrative suggest the posthuman narrative's capability to reconfigure and disrupt human subjectivity. The novel explores multiple timelines, identities, and realities, blurring the line between fiction and reality, ultimately constructing a dystopian world. The posthuman dystopia within the text leads to a lack of human agency and centrality in the novel, ultimately drawing attention to the limits and impositions of scientific, technological, and posthuman studies. Hence, the non-human experiences and perspectives in the novel compel the readers to re-evaluate anthropocentric views, encouraging an evolved understanding of human and posthuman relationships. The research situates the novel within the broader field of posthuman studies, reflecting current debates on the nature of human agency and identity. It addresses the growing interconnections, responsibility and repercussions of the human and posthuman world. Thus, the novel, through its structure and posthuman narrative strategy, constructs a dystopia, bringing into light the disruption of traditional individual identity and humanistic thought in the world.

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