

Theory of Dystopia Unfolded - A Bird's-eye View of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's "The Insect"

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Abstract: Dystopia is a term which was used by John Stuart Mill in 1868 when he gave speech in the British House of Commons criticizing the government's Irish land policy. It is the opposite of the term 'utopia' which was taken from Sir Thomas More's novel. While utopia is an imaginary place where everything is pleasant, dystopia is a place where everything is unpleasant. In literature the concept of dystopia is often used to depict a futuristic society which is in a degraded state. Dystopian literature warns the society about the consequences of degraded living. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word 'dystopia' as 'an imaginary place or state in which everything is extremely bad or unpleasant.' Dystopia constantly explores the concept of technology going far beyond the control of human hold.

Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *The Insect* is a short story translated from Bengali by Subrata Banerjee. The story revolves around the unimaginable future where every individual is robbed of their unique name and identity, given a mechanical life to be led as directed, and monitored constantly by an electronic insect. The story narrates the encounter between two characters Rikta and Jaba who succeed in breaking away from the monotonous dystopian life.

This paper attempts to highlight the dystopian features in the short story. It also attempts to underscore the relative ideologies and hidden concepts in the story.

Keywords: Crisis, Dystopia, dystopian, futuristic, identity, technology

I. Introduction

Life is like a book which holds a very interesting story with an unpredictable climax. Nobody knows how one would be after a few days, let alone after several years. One has to live every page of life to reach the last page. For over centuries, writers have tried to predict how the future of mankind would be. Most of them predicted an age of high-tech science and technology where humanity and morality would be alien culture in the society. Writers like H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Margaret Atwood, and others have portrayed fictional futuristic societies which serve as fair warnings to real societies and people of the respective ages. All have portrayed societies where man would have let science take over humanity, the subsequent consequences and how the protagonist and his or her society too suffer. The consequences often portray loss of identity, individuality, human tendencies, basic human instincts, morality, and culture in general. Such works of literature have the theory of dystopia applied to them.

II. Dystopia – An Overview

'Dystopia' ^[2] is a term coined by John Stuart Mill in the late 19th century. It is a term derived from Thomas More's Utopia; but as a contrast to it. The term 'utopia' means good place. Dystopia means a bad or negative place. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term 'dystopia' as "an imaginary place or state in which everything is extremely bad or unpleasant." Dystopian literature carries cyberpunks, stories set in imaginary world controlled by computers, which portray societies with extremely contemporary social trends set. They always have their protagonist mentally struggling to relieve himself or herself from the monotony of the cyber life. The following are a few characteristics found commonly in dystopian fictions presented in the website George Orwell's Links^[1]:

- strict conformity among citizens and the general assumption that dissent and individuality are bad
- a fear or disgust of the world outside the state
- a common view of traditional life as primitive and nonsensical
- a penal system that lacks due process laws and often employs psychological or physical torture
- constant surveillance by state
- the banishment of the natural world from daily life
- a protagonist who questions the society, often feeling intrinsically that something is terribly wrong
- features technology more advanced than that of contemporary society

Apart from these, dystopian literary works often carry practices that are quite similar to the current age. This enables the readers to compare and contrast the present and future. It also brings a kind of association in the readers' minds so that the patterns would be identified and a fear would be evoked.

III. The Story "The Insect"

The short story *The Insect*^[4] is one such dystopian story written by the Sahitya Akedemi Award winning Bengali writer Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and translated into English by Subrata Banerjee. The story is set in a distant future where people work under monotonous conditions, live as individuals under the constant monitoring of an electronic insect that records their every single movement, thought, and even dream. The story begins with the introduction of the protagonist Rikta who is starting home from work, with the electronic insect hovering above every individual following wherever they go. There is also a detailed picture of the technological advancements of the period. The tall set buildings with moving platforms and escalators, flying cars that operate on nuclear-powered engines and a buoyancy stabilizer owned by every individual, luxurious flats, videophones that enable interaction with desired person at any time, robots that serve the humans, and several more. Adding on to these, is a glimpse of the lifestyle of the people of that period, for the institution called family and marriage do not exist; and individuals are free to mix with whomever they please. Children are left to crèche and children's home where they grow up learning the lifestyle of that age. The story then moves on to introduce the catalyst in the story, Jaba. Jaba approaches Rikta with the question, "Who am I?" (69). She explains the identity crisis she has and tries to seek the help of Rikta. But, Rikta advises her to approach the ID (Identity Department), that helps individuals who lost track of their name and other details. The same night Rikta has a dream in her sleep. She dreams of a life being alone where her insect keeps following her despite constant requests to leave her alone. She wakes up out of the dream and decides to meet Jaba. When Rikta meets Jaba in her room, she finds out that Jaba has killed her insect using a ray gun. Though initially shocked, Rikta decides to do the same since both are now in an unsafe situation. She kills her insect and both start laughing out. "After many, many years. They go on laughing with complete abandon, for the first time ever!" (72).

IV. Dystopic Features In The Story

The story begins as if it is a continuation of a longer story and ends with a quizzical note. However the end denotes a new beginning for the characters in the story. This technique is in itself a very postmodernistic. There are lot of postmodernist characteristics found in the story. One, is the condition which Lacanian psychology terms "Schizophrenia". Ron Shapiro, in his book entitled *Surviving Postmodernism* quotes, "schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feelings of identity depend on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me' over time." (22)^[5] In *The Insect* schizophrenic experience is found in the character Jaba who is introduced with the question "Who am I?" which is strange for a normal human being to utter. She loses her identity and is confused whether she is Jaba or Purna. The situation turns all the more bizarre when Rikta advises Jaba to contact the ID. We come to know that a department functions exclusively for those who forget who they are! The narrator gives a brief reason for it too through Rikta, who too at times forgets her own name.

At times Rikta too faces the same problem. For days on end nobody calls her by her name. Nobody speaks to her. Nobody even looks at her face. At such times she wonders, "Who am I?" (70)

The second characteristic is constant surveillance by the state. The people of the unknown world in the story are under the constant surveillance of the insect that hovers behind every person. The insect proves to be a 'bugging' creature that does not leave anyone alone even for a single moment. Even in her dreams Rikta visualises the insect.

In her sleep, Rikta has a long dream. There is not a soul on this earth. She alone is alive. She is walking slowly along the bank of a river. The insect, however, continues to hover behind her head, watching, observing. Suddenly Rikta turns around and confronts the insect, "Why are you following me even now? On whose behalf? For what purpose? I'm alone now. Alone! Totally alone!" The insect remains unperturbed. (70) The insect does not leave her alone even in her dreams and continues to survey her as dutifully as ever. It is only towards the end that Rikta and Jaba are able to get rid of the insect by using the ray gun.

Another dystopian trait in the story is the lack of family or love or a human bonding. Rikta witnesses a man and a woman who get out of a car in total silence and she guesses they would spend the night together. She also explains how people of that age have no permanent relationships or marriages. "Men and women can, however, mix freely, just as they wish" (68). Children are born and soon after their birth the mother has nothing to do with them, they are taken to a crèche and later to a children's home. "The child does not bear the name of either of its parents" (68).

Yet another feature is the unimaginable technological advancements mentioned in the story. Few to be mentioned: the extremely tall buildings, flying cars, hovering-electronic insects, pop-up video screens, plastic

surgery that makes everyone beautiful, the Identity Department that can help anyone trace any other individual, working-class robots, and many more. Nobody know if these advancements would actually be established in the future, but still these features are so picturesque that one cannot but help blend in with the story's settings. However, these features are painted with a shade of gray. Hence these advancements, instead of triggering curiosity and interest, triggers fear and uneasiness. Especially when the houses are described to be made of glass walls which ensure no privacy for individuals, it gives a jolt.

A small sitting room. A small bedroom. A tiny space like the kitchen of a doll's house. A toilet. The walls are of glass. There is no provision for curtains. At the press of a button the transparent glass become translucent. (68, 69)

V. Conclusion

Dystopian world is a well-developed yet chaotic world. If such is the world that would be left for the future, one would not even think of living it. Life is to be relished with all its lights and shades. The taste of life stays in the unexpected events to come for the next day. Dystopian life fixes things before hand and destroys the flavour of living. It might be a world full of advancements that would ease man's way of living. But, the monotony would make man yearn for a normal life with its mother-flavour retained. The Insect brings out the future world, its people, lifestyle and the effects in a nut shell. It sure does serve as a warning to the present society what kind of hazard the world would face in future. The loss of individuality, loss of identity, loss of morality, loss of proper lifestyle, and so on are sure to bring an end to mankind. By concluding the story with the killing of the insect, Mukhopadhyay has given a solution to what might prevent a chaotic end. The insect might be taken as a signifier of greed and extreme desires of mankind. Only when the vaulting desires are killed, man would be free. This has been beautifully put by Rabindranath Tagore –

The greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume. It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment's hesitation to crush beauty and life.^[3]

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