

# Dystopian Literature: In Conversation with Critical Discourse and Contemporary World

KAZI ASHRAF UDDIN

The twentieth century's interactions with the popular revolutions, capitalist advent, authoritarianism, World Wars, repressive state-system paves the way for a frowning skepticism about the Enlightenment metanarrative and nuances the global literary firmament with dystopian motif. And, we got classic dystopian authors like Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Margaret Atwood, William Gibson to name a few. Political sensitivity and literary imagination are the two pivotal components of their oeuvres. Dystopia, popularly conceived as an imagined state or society where suffering, injustice, repression and control mechanisms are the essentialist features, accounts for the post-apocalyptic human condition. Hence, appears the dystopian fiction showcasing such human (or posthuman)

tion, and the arts. People in general and the party members are forced to believe that black is white if the state of the party demands it which they call *doubtthinking*. In this state, people have no privacy as their apartments are equipped with telescreens so that they may be under surveillance. The so-called Thought Police or "The Private Eye" employs undercover agents so check any so-called subversive tendencies against the Big Brother. Everyone of the country is forced to love their Big Brother, an attitude they call "positive nationalism."

Yes, we are talking about Orwellian prophetic dystopian novel. Published in 1949 and set in 1984 in the fictional superstate of Oceania, Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four: A Novel* visualizes a world-order when the world falls victim to endless

presented as false dogma which the individuals are meant to believe even if they do not have any scientific or empirical proof. We find such Orwellian resonance later in the economic concept of "propaganda model" (Chomsky and Herman) or Chomsky's "manufacturing consent." We can trace literary sampling of Foucauldian "panopticon" or Bentham's architectural surveillance in Orwell's *telescreen*, a device that is equipped with television, secret camera and microphone to bug and control any non-conformist discourse, an accusation which nowadays is unsettling big tech giants like Google, Apple and Facebook. The uncanny pop-up of Amazon or Daraz ad of my favorite ear-pods on my Facebook home page is perhaps what Orwellian telescreen or modern Alexa can perform by invading our privacy and tracking our preferences. To establish the affective control of emotion, Ministry of Love regulates, converts, and punishes any unorthodox emotional behavior and if the cases are serious, they are sent to the torture cell Room 101, a nightmarish reminder of Abu Ghraib, Alcatraz Prison or Guantanamo Bay for the contemporary readers. Even, memory hole, a device to delete unwanted and unorthodox (to the state, or course) memories is present in the novel as a hegemonic tool. Perhaps, we can relate it to the electrocution or lobotomy used in the treatment of trauma and other pneumatic discrepancies.

Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, once Bolshevik and Communist party member also disengaged himself from Stalinist ideological and literary essentialism. His discomfort with the regulatory aesthetic norm namely "socialist realism" is present in his literature. Set in a futuristic and totalitarian One State run by the dictator Benefactor (literacy predecessor of Orwellian 'Big Brother'), Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1921 novel *We*, embodies a geopolitical reorganization and hints at the occupational nature of the imperial states. The all-pervasive glass structures in order to ensure mass surveillance help us again to read what Jeremy Bentham prison-design meant. Visibility as a instrument for overpowering endorses Foucauldian Knowledge/Power nexus. The specter of Cartesian Machine-Animal (*machina animata*) returns in the form of the nameless and codified characters of the novel who are watched by secret police, psychologically castrated by Great

Operation in order to avoid mutiny, cannot have dreams and sometimes function as "tractor in human form." Zamyatin's prophecy of a late-capitalist dehumanization and post-humanist mind-body re-embodiment has a tacit resonance of Frederic Jameson's famous pronouncement, "Postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism." When someone dreams big in *We*, they are detected as having mental illness, a discursive violence that Michel Foucault has repeatedly mentioned in *The Birth of a Clinic* and *Madness and Civilization*. The use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the prolonged war causing human loss just aptly reflects the contemporary imperial attitude of the G8 nations.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931/1932), apart from its common literary chronotope of a totalitarian state in the future "World State," heavily and almost accurately anticipates the genetic, biotechnological, scientific and environmental futurism such as Psycho-Phone (machine for sleep-learning), cloning, test-tube baby, mood enhancement, classical conditioning, simulation technology and the like. The citizens of the World State with a predetermined class/caste based on their intelligence detected through "childhood indoctrination programme" resonates the race and caste politics across the world, or the contemporary polemics about eugenics.

Oftentimes called an oppressive and depressive speculative dystopian fiction, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* underscores the telling feminist question of women's position in a patriarchal matrix. The handmaid Offred is just another victim of a phallogocentric nexus who lends her womb to other elite infertile couples. Living in a repressive male-dominated state called Republic of Gilead where women have only three confined status- wives, Marthas (domestic servants) or handmaids (a form of fertility slave), Offred the handmaid, has lost all human agency. Atwood's novel is rich in its gynocritical preoccupation and can serve as a seminal text in understanding the capitalization of women's bio/body-capital and the devastating psychological aftermath of it. Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (trans. Gayatri Spivak) also delineates what Spivak calls "the harsh indictment of an exploitative social system." Narrated from an intimate gendered perspective,

such dystopian can also complement Hélène Cixous' famous gendered writing discourse called "écriture féminine."

Within South Asian context, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) envisages the extreme margin of caste/social segregation where people are resettled and separated by building dividing and confining walls. Akbar delineates an ecological apocalypse with sheer scarcity of drinking water and fresh air where big corporation like Skydome produces fresh air. Spatial demarcation of rich and poor neighborhood is strictly maintained. Heavily guarded walls, brutish army of "repeaters" (some readers are reminded of the RSS cadets), communal and classicist hatred, ecocide, massive urban restructuring, child labor, brainwashing mechanism – all lead Shailini, Leila's mother, to the verge of an unbearably surreal future. Echoing the social and political fabric of India, Akbar's portrayal is thus a reflection of the unbearable present and projection of the fearful future.

Be it futuristic or science-fictional, or set in the contemporary world, dystopian fictions serve as a powerful critic of society and its different repressive mechanism. Among other thematic components like mind-body duality, anthropomorphism, geo-spatial re-mapping, posthuman condition, perhaps the most pervasive aspects that almost all dystopian fictions deal with is the issue of the control over human life and death, critical concerns popularly known as biopolitics and necropolitics. Critics like Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, Jasbir Puar et al. have extensively contributed in this field accommodating different intersectional concerns such as race, ethnicity, religion, xenophobia, and coloniality. Dystopian fiction has a generalized thematic umbrella which updates itself according to the cultural and geographical specifications, yet this genre remains intimate to our own narrative, true to our own time and place. Every individual, every period, every place has its own anecdote of dystopian narrative. Sometimes as social commentary while sometimes as political forebodings, dystopian fiction has always drawn attention of theorists, sociologists, cyber-critics to name a few schools of thought.

Kazi Ashraf Uddin is Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Jahangirnagar University.



condition. The bracketed "posthuman" entails a confusion that our academia is dealing with vis-à-vis the generic blur of dystopian fiction attempting to negotiate between modern fiction, postmodern fiction, sci-fi novel, cyberpunk novel and the like. Perhaps such obscurity is what gives and will give the dystopian fiction available popular and discursive currency across the decades and perhaps centuries.

Let's start with a storyline. There is a state ruled by the "Party" led by a powerful "Big Brother." In this state of the Big Brother, the Ministry of Truth controls information: news, entertainment, educa-

war, mass state surveillance, authoritarianism and thought control. Humans cease to apply logic and reason and conform to the imposed and propagated ideals of the state. None can go beyond what the state makes them believe; any breach of this situation is considered to be a *thoughtcrime* and hence punishable. Even the linguistic ability is curtailed and controlled by imposing *Newspeak* as the official language with simplified grammar, and limited vocabulary restrain freedom of thought. Orwell envisioned an advent of post-truth era in his 1949 book. Slogan like 2+2=5 is what Orwell

## The Bat, the Pigeon and the Doctor

SANJEEDA HUSAIN

"Mama, mama re! Would you like to munch on my toast and have a sip from my sugary milk tea?"

My five-month old son carefully listens to Nipa as she speaks. Nipa is a part-time maid servant at my mom's place. And she always has stories to tell.

"Don't you go again to your father's house my dear mama. When you are not here, we look for you everywhere. Where has the mama gone? Are you not my *lokkhi* mama, hmm?"

*Lokkhi* means nice and well-behaved, and my son nods his head affirmatively and replies, "Hu!"

Then he looks at her inquisitively and frowns.

"We haven't heard anything about Arup Roton today," I pause and ask Nipa, "How is he?"

"Unwell and troubled. His left hand is burnt. His mom and dad went to office, and he was kept under the surveillance of his *pishi*. That careless aunt made tea and kept it beside the feet of the *thakur*. The hot tea fell on his hand."

My son looks hurt. He leans his head on my shoulder and puts his arm around my neck.

I turn on the TV to divert his attention. A highly contagious virus in China is killing a lot of people. The virus transmits through respiratory droplets of infects people. The disease has originated from a wet market, they claim. Perhaps, it has been carried by the bats they eat.

"Tell me, tell me O Lord, who in the world can really eat those vicious bats?" Nipa whispers as she stands up to get ready for her work. April, 2020

I hear a siren and walk to the balcony. I see an ambulance in front of the opposite building. Ammu suddenly arrives and shouts, "The virus is everywhere and you have opened that door to the balcony! There's a baby in the house!"

She immediately orders me to have a bath before touching the baby.

I feel sad and hopeless as I go to my bed-

room. My son is fast asleep. He looks content and happy.

But I hear another distressed child crying somewhere. Is that Arup Roton? Both his parents have been working during this entire period of lockdown. His father is a policeman and his mother, a banker.

Apart from Nipa, who else can inform us about Arup? Nipa is not allowed inside the building because part-time helping hands, drivers, and even newspapers are banned in the area. If we need medicine or food, we call up the security guards. They ask the community police and request them to buy the essentials. And when things are brought, they are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized before they reach us.

With Nipa not being allowed, Ammu now has to do all the household chores alone. She is, consequently, always angry.

I turn on the TV to divert his attention. A highly contagious virus in China is killing a lot of people. The virus transmits through respiratory droplets of infects people. The disease has originated from a wet market, they claim. Perhaps, it has been carried by the bats they eat.

"Didn't I tell you to get a bath before your son wakes up?" I look at ammu as she glares and spits the words out.

I feel like bursting out, "What do you mean by 'your son'? Isn't he your grandson as well?" But no, I gulp down my rage.

It's really not a time to be impatient and agitated. We are all struggling to survive this containment.

May, 2020  
During the afternoon, my son and I sit beside the window in my brother's room. My brother

does his office work online, typing on his laptop. My son stares at him amazed.

My son also stares out the window and gazes at the sky. The Dhaka sky hasn't been so serene and clear in years. We watch birds of various kinds. They chirp, and they sing; they dance and they tweet.

We also watch kites being flown on the roof tops by little children and their fathers. The children cry out, "Abbu here, here goes our kite. Abbu, abbbuuu!"

Apart from abbu, other words are mostly indistinct. The afternoon sky resonates with their calling out to their fathers. My son listens to them carefully and tries to imitate them. Finally, after a whole week's effort, he calls out, "Abbu" loud and clear.

He also shouts abbu, abbu when he hears those children. Their fathers are at home. Where's his father? Does he know?

"Always calling abbu, abbu. His abbu is everything. He has his bath, splashes water and calls out, 'abbu.' He eats and he says, 'abbu.' Even after he sneezes, he utters 'abbu.'" My brother gets up from his chair and lifts my boy up from my lap as he speaks to him. He leaves with his nephew on his shoulder to see what Ammu has cooked for today's iftar.

I sit back and lean towards the window. Will there be a storm? A gust of hot wind surrounds me and the sky turns peach black. I see flocks of bats flying and covering the entire sky. Next, they try to enter through the window. I close it as fast as I can, but not before one rushes in.

It hangs from the curtain stand and starts swinging by covering its head with its pair of wings. Then it starts flapping them and makes a flight around the room. It approaches me and stares directly into my eyes.

I am about to faint when my brother turns on the light and cries out, "Apa, we are all waiting for you at the dining table."

\*\*\*

Apart from me, everyone else in the house has gone to sleep after iftar. It's drizzling, and the breeze seems perfect for a nap after a long



day of fasting. I sit with my hot mug of coffee and turn on the news channel. The highest number of new corona patients have been detected across the country today: almost nine hundred.

Ammu's phone rings. It's Nipa. She enquires after her mama, and pleads to be allowed in.

"No one is allowed inside, Nipa. This disease is very dangerous," I try to explain.

"How long will this continue? All our money is spent. I cannot pay the slumlord. He will now kick us out. Neither I, nor my husband has any work. My little girl is having sugar dissolved in water. We can't afford milk," she starts crying.

"Will you come tomorrow? We will send you some money," I try to console her.

"Yes, sure, thank you, but how long will people help us like this? We are ready to work. I have heard markets will open next week. So, my husband will be able to open his fruit-and-vegetable shop again. No matter what you say, people will need help before

Eid. I'll work for them."

"You don't need to come to our house," I feel petrified. A large number of corona patients are detected in her area.

"Are you throwing me off?" I hear the shudder in her tone.

"No, Nipa, you will again start working once this virus is gone. Don't worry," I try to pacify her.

After speaking with her I turn the TV off. People are already out in the streets in large numbers. Surely, they will flood the markets for Eid shopping. I wonder what will happen if all these people leave the city to head for their villages.

I come out from the living room and stand alone in the balcony. A pair of pigeons have built a nest on the sun shade right above where I am standing now. Perhaps they have laid eggs. The male pigeon grooms the female one with his beak, cleaning the fleas from her feathers. He shares his food with her. I hear the pigeons cooing too.

I look down and see a man walking alone on the empty road. I recognize his strides, his gestures and movements. He stands a little away from my building and removes his mask from his face. We smile at each other.

I rush inside to get my phone. I need to talk to him, not having spoken with him properly for so long. I find a text message from him instead.

"A patient arrived at the hospital this evening. His relatives reported of his kidneys being damaged. Only when he started having severe chest pain and breathing problem, and finally embraced death within an hour, his relatives confessed that he's actually a covid-19 patient. They hid the truth, otherwise, no hospital would admit him."

I along with my team of doctors and nurses treating that patient will be going into quarantine. I will come to visit if I am tested negative.

Give my love to our son."

Sanjeeda Husain is a Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Dhaka.