



## IMAGINING THE APOCALYPSE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON AMERICAN AND THIRD WORLD DYSTOPIAS

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### ABSTRACT

Dystopian imaginings in literature, particularly literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, reflect both global as well as national predilections depending on the immediate social realities most imminent to their authors. This paper attempts to explore the subtle divide that exists in the way dystopian themes are articulated in four different texts in English written by the first world and third world writers. As all dystopian art aspires for some form of social propaganda, it will be interesting to explore how these writers strike the delicate balance between direct /indirect propaganda and art. Dystopian works selected for the study are: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (1997), Ngugi wa Thiongo's latest novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006).

**Keywords:** *Dystopia, Propogansa, First World, Third World, Colonization, Neo-Imperialism, Consumptin, Post-Colonial, Environment.*

### Citation:

- APA** Pandit, Nigh, A. (2017) Imagining The Apocalypse: A Comparative Perspective On American And Third World Dystopias. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 4(4), 100-105.
- MLA** Pandit, Nirzari. "Imagining The Apocalypse: A Comparative Perspective On American And Third World Dystopias." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp.100-105.



## INTRODUCTION

Dystopian imaginings in literature, particularly literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, reflect both global as well as national predilections depending on the immediate social realities most imminent to their authors. While this need not necessitate a convenient bracketing of dystopian works into distinct dystopian themes that may quite appropriately be labeled as fitting into a first world or third world context, the selection of the theme and its treatment may provide some pointers to whether there is in fact a first world or third world dimension to dystopian works.

This paper attempts to explore the subtle divide that exists in the way dystopian themes are articulated in four different texts in English written by the first world and third world writers. For the purposes of comparison, highly popular dystopian works pertaining to the same period have been selected. Interestingly, the point of comparison here is not only the differential treatment of a very common set of dystopian themes by the authors, but also the political, sociological and economic milieu that makes these dystopian utterances a possibility. Thus, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) showcases a post-apocalyptic world devoid of vegetation (environment) and human values that may be more immediately located in a world where global warming and ecological destruction seem to be the only logically predictable end to human civilization. Similarly, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) showcases a future order where political, economic and social interests converge to promote and support televised mortal combat between teenagers. For an adult teenager soaking in sitcoms and reality shows, the image of teenagers fighting each other on television till one dies seems perhaps a near possibility.

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (1997), on the other hand, strikes a different note altogether by focusing on the clear producer-consumer divide that defines organ trade between the first world and the third world and the evolving dynamics of this relationship. Her immediate context is the increasing reconfiguring of the world into production and consumption zones particularly with respect to organ trade. On a similar note, Ngugi wa

Thiongo's latest novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) is a satirical dystopian work on the dictatorship of an African country called Aburiria in a post-colonial environment.

Whereas the comparisons between the different dystopian texts highlight the differences in theme selection and prioritization, one of the objectives of this paper is to examine the recurrence of stock dystopian themes across the dystopian imaginings while adhering to the first world/third world context. Needless to say, the very concept of dystopia is western. Dystopian fiction has not proliferated in the third world as it has in the west. However, a study into the reasons for the same is beyond the scope of this paper. Of particular interest to this paper are the subtle and direct ways in which all these authors convey what constitutes or does not constitute "humanity". As all dystopian art aspires for some form of social propaganda, it will be interesting to explore how these writers strike the delicate balance between direct /indirect propaganda and art. For instance, all works selected for comparison have a clear set of ideological issues to empathize with. Thus, while there is a strong concern for the environment and its preservation in one instance, there is a strong focus on the limits to exploiting human bodies for gain.

## DYSTOPIAN THEMES - WHAT IS COMMON AND WHAT IS NOT?

Dystopian writing has been a characteristic and distinct form of literary expression that has formed a niche for itself since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, dystopian writing has served as a 19<sup>th</sup> century foil to utopian writing across the ages. While there are several forces that have contributed to the birth and growth of dystopian fiction, modernity, industrialization, technological progress and more importantly, colonization have had a major role to play in sustaining the genre.

Like any other genre, dystopian fiction deals with stock forms and themes. Some of the most recurrent themes that find currency in dystopian fiction are:

- An authoritarian or totalitarian government known for repression and control
- Lack of individual freedom and expression
- Homogeneity



- Constant warfare and violence
- Acute differentiation between classes / haves and have-nots
- Advances in technology especially in fields like genetics and medicine
- Censorship of art and literature
- Characters who realize what their world is really like and rebel against it
- A dystopia that masquerades as a utopia.

Whereas there are variations in the treatment of these themes, in almost all novels demonstrating a dystopian future, there is a strong predilection to paint an acutely disturbing society mirroring present-day realities albeit in cataclysmic fashion. In depicting such societies, it is more or less implied that real present-day conflicts or challenges have inexorably led to that future state. In a sense, the four literary works discussed here have been selected arbitrarily to showcase the dramatic and literary reactions to the current political, economic and social crises buffeting the present world order.

In *The Road*, an unspecified disaster - climate change, nuclear fall-out or some natural disaster, has created a society where whatever is left of humanity survives by turning cannibalistic. The only two protagonists- a father and son, are moving from north to south to escape the towns and cities that are completely burnt down. At all times, the protagonists are plagued by two kinds of concerns - to save their belongings from being stolen or robbed and to save themselves from being murdered and eaten by other starving men. Over and above such fears, there is also an overriding apprehension to transcend the temptation to rob other people or kill them for survival. The central conflict for the protagonists is plain and simple: to what extent will one stoop in order to stay alive?

*The Hunger Games* is set in a futuristic North American country called Panem. The place is divided into 12 districts and governed from a centrally located place called Capitol. The novel's main protagonist is Katniss - a teenage girl from 'District 12', who serves as the sole breadwinner for her small family since her father's death. Incidentally, *The Hunger Games* derives its name from a special type of game organized and regulated by the state. The game is played out every year and features two

contestants from each district who fight each other till death - all on a reality show that is beamed live into each home in Panem. The survivor is bestowed with titles and favours by the state. Participation in the games is mandatory. At the end of the game, Katniss is the victor, but unable to kill Peeta, her friend and partner, she decides to kill herself. The President takes offence at this act of defiance, and revokes all the benefits Katniss is entitled to as a victor.

*Harvest* is a dystopian play, based in an unknown Indian metro teeming with thousands of unemployed youths who are ready to sell their organs in order to sustain their families. Om Prakash, the protagonist of the play, is selected as a potential donor. However selection automatically entails that his life will be entirely supervised by the North American beneficiary with the help of advanced surveillance technology. He is not only forced to change his lifestyle but also alter his relations with family members who too are under continuous surveillance. Om's brother Jeetu, is condemned for being a male prostitute, but he strongly defends his profession by claiming that though he sells his body for a living, he continues to own it unlike Om who has given his ownership rights away.

Wa Thiong's *Wizard of the Crow* is again about a huge number of unemployed youths, one of whom named Kamiti, becomes a wizard to earn a living. This is a novel about the stark social inequality in a third world country of Africa, where the dictator/ruler is only making attempts at wooing America for unrealistic loans for unrealistic reasons. On the one hand there is acute and rampant corruption coupled with red-tapism among the highest ranks of society, and on the other, the masses of poor unemployed ordinary people are expected to show restraint in the name of 'true' nationalism. The peoples' subjugation by the dictator is total and complete, but the writer does not fail to bring in the element of late capitalism and racism in the relationship between Aburiria and the U.S.A.

#### WHY DYSTOPIAS NOW?

In all the above texts, authorial intentions notwithstanding, there seems to be a strong cultural momentum supported by certain immediate geo-political, social and economic dynamics that



contributes to the creation and consumption of such dystopian literature. However it is the manner in which this dynamic is explored and relayed in the texts that determines their ideological underpinnings.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, vestiges of present day society are occasionally presented to deepen the contrast between the past and the apocalyptic setting of the novel, but there is seemingly no reflection on present day complexities that may have actually contributed to the creation of McCarthy's bleak landscape. Is the novel an allegory then on a present that valorizes economic progress at the cost of social balance? Interestingly, all signs of economic progress which characterize and define present-day North America are tellingly absent – in place is some vague hope and belief that the protagonists carry the light or burden of humanity and civilization and that their way is the “good” way – not quite out of place at a time when present-day US posturing as a guardian of the democratic rights of all peoples and nations is being dubbed as aggressive and meddling in the affairs of other nations. Amidst the lawlessness and moral decay that has engulfed the environment in which they stand, the man and his son strike a very odd note by resolutely believing in a vaguely held notion of goodness. Interestingly, Marc Godin, in a review of the novel, hints at the parallels between the current urban condition of the homeless and destitute in North America and the situation of the man and his son in the novel, who prefer to “travel with their belongings in a scavenged metal shopping cart, a preferred mode of storage and travel for society's inner city homeless.” Oddly in a world characterized by economic opulence, the urban poor strike a distinctly jarring and different note in the landscape. In order to perhaps dramatize the predicament of humanity in general, McCarthy strips away all the trappings of modern/postmodern living and asks fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life and above all, the role of altruism in an uncaring world.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins' projections for the teenagers of the future contain, among other things, real mortal combats between teenagers dished up for spectators of reality shows on television. Writing on the new trend in young adult fiction to paint gloomy futures, Paolo

Bacigalupi in an insightful piece titled “The Dark Side of Young Adult Fiction”, offers a prognosis of the situation:

“I suspect that young adults crave stories of broken futures because they themselves are uneasily aware that their world is falling apart. We might pummel them with advertising that says they should buy a new iPod, or Xbox, or Droid XYZ, and that everything in the world is shiny and delightful -- but whether we're looking at the loss of biodiversity, or the depletion of cheap and easily accessible energy, or the hazards of global warming, our children will inherit a world significantly depleted and damaged in comparison to the one our parents handed down to us. And they know it.”

While at one level, *Hunger Games* seems to be making a statement about the state's control over the young, at another level the novel appears to be hitting out at the hyper-reality epidemic that is now overwhelming the North American teenager fed up on a diet of video and computer games and reality shows. Deeply mired in a world where the divide between the real and the hyper-real is fast blurring, the average North American youth is likely to discover his/her social universe increasingly engulfed by technological hyper-reality and the mass media - not very unlike the fate of teenagers in Panem. The focus here is obviously on how reality shows will evolve and morph with other media like video games to create a make-believe world where bloodletting between show participants will be orchestrated on the basis of TRP ratings and acute forms of consumerism. As with any reality show that thrives on make-believe and sensationalism, the televised mortal combat in *Hunger Games* is constantly on, thanks to arbitrary changes made at various stages. The rules, objectives and basic principles of the show/game are manipulated to suit the excitement of the audience and the involvement of the sponsors.

On a comparative note, whereas the two North American novels showcase exploitation *within* a state – the haves and the have nots, *Harvest* poignantly captures the forces of exploitation that operate from *within* and *without* – the underdeveloped or developing state and external



powers. The unemployed youth and their families are no longer beneficiaries of the third-world state. Left with no means to survive their body is fodder for the super-rich consumers of the affluent first world. In a global economy, where cheap third world labour is the only point of differentiation for competitive advantage between corporations of the first world, *Harvest* goes a step ahead to describe how people's bodies can be bought in exchange for good money - money that can guarantee a decent living to a poor family that otherwise scavenges the streets. Oddly, the terms of the organ trade business are heavily skewed against third world citizens. *Harvest* shows how an old and ailing but rich woman from North America cannot find a single organ donor in her own country, when there are long queues of over 6000 willing donors for the 'job' in a city in India. On a similar note, *Wizard of the Crow* is definitely a novel about a corrupt and self-centered government indifferent to its people who are perpetually jobless and hungry, but it adds an important dimension of neo-imperialism which subjugates the trodden subjects doubly. The west- largely America, sees a third world state like Aburiria as a potential borrower who will perpetually remain in its debts because of the rampant universal temptation to buy the western consumers goods which even the poor of such countries are taught to hanker after and develop a fascination for.

Dystopian fiction, like utopian, is a genre which originally belongs to the West and has proliferated in the West. Writers like Padmanabhan and Wa Thiongo have borrowed this genre and have given a local touch to its representations. Though the writers may have been influenced by the English tradition of writing, their works have poignantly brought out the post-colonial, neo-imperialist control over and manipulation of their native land and society. Both works have gained acclaim and popularity among the masses. Moreover, all the four literary works discussed here have been made into or are in the process of being made into films.

#### **HUMANITY – AN UNFINISHED PROJECT**

Whereas literature has always engaged with the question of what constitutes or does not constitute "humanity", the age old debate acquires a new stridency particularly in dystopian fiction in the

context of colonization. However, each text referenced here, engages with issues of colonization and de-humanization in very different ways, by virtue of its unique location. It must be mentioned here that beginning with the publication of H.G. Well's hugely popular novel - *The War of the Worlds*, dystopian writing and to an extent its sister genre - Science Fiction, have had a very uneasy relationship with colonization. Whereas dystopian writing branched off into documenting the horrors of colonization by looking at how human evolution will ultimately end with one part of humanity colonizing the other, Science Fiction took a different trajectory and relived the nightmares of colonization from the perspective of alien invasions – in a sense, the *Brave New World* of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* participate in this same discourse as do popular American movies like *Star Wars* and the *Matrix Trilogy*. This trope of colonization runs through all the four texts imbuing each with a very unique perspective on the colonizer and the colonized. Thus, in *The Road* the physically strong survivors amputate and preserve the weak just as anyone would to store their food for later use. In *The Hunger Games* – an elaborate and highly differentiated labor economy that favors one form of economic activity over the other exists to sustain the games. The rich ruling elite living in Capitol determine how each district will support the government and the economy by making sure that each district exclusively specializes in agriculture or technology or manufacturing. The pride of place obviously goes to those districts that provide the technological and media infrastructure to support the telecast of the games on television while the agrarian district and the other not so fortunate districts are shown to comprise poverty-stricken communities who also feed the games by sending contestants from their district. Ironically, this future state of affairs seems to be a stark reminder of how actual present-day geo-political emphasis on the digital and technological economy in developed and developing countries is impacting the agricultural sector. The play *Harvest* on the other hand, shows a clear and obvious form of neo-colonialism supported by pliant trade and commercial regulations between the first and third world countries today. In a chilling



reminder of how technological advances in Pharma and Medicine on the one hand and the convergence of interests between buyers and suppliers of human organs on the other has created an industry that not only creates and sustains the desire to stay forever young but also provides the technological means to match the expectations of their consumers by supporting the growth of donor colonies in various parts of the world. In a similar vein, *Wizard of the Crow* satirizes the third world corrupt government which is only interested in buttering its own bread at the cost of millions of its population who lives in acute poverty, insanity and inhuman conditions. The Global Bank is well aware of this fact and is yet eager to give hefty loans to fund absolutely stupid and unrealistic ventures of the government, as long as it knows they will be paid back with interest. The predicament of the third world is twice as compared to the first world, as the citizens of such states are on the one hand victimized by their rulers, and on the other hand by the global superpowers.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can see a sceptre of hope in the concern of these dystopian novels to provide the reader shocking spectacles of a future nightmare that firmly rests on specific present-day political, economic, social and moral tensions. And while they walk the thin tight-rope between propaganda and art to relay their prognosis of our global state of progress, they also participate in unique first world and third world anxieties. On the whole even as they differ in their approach, collectively, they seem to be saying (to twist T.S. Eliot a bit): "the world may have begun with a bang, but we are not going to let it end in a whimper!"

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