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# Research maGma

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### **A STUDY OF TECHNOLOGICAL DYSTOPIA AS SEEN IN RAY BRADBURY'S FAHRENHEIT 451**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper examines the role of technology in dystopian fiction such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. It focuses on the dystopian conflicts of the protagonist Guy Montag which includes freedom of the person, individualism and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse. It also sheds light on the relation between dystopian conflicts and existentialism. It highlights the phenomenological elements in *Fahrenheit 451* and studies the text in the context of technological dystopia.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

Dystopia, Technology, Existentialism and Nuclear apocalypse.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Dystopian literature is a genre of writing that explores social and political systems in an imagined place, which is often set in future. The term 'dystopia' appeared first in a speech before the British parliament by Greg Webber and John Stuart Mill in 1868. In that speech Mill said, "It is perhaps too complimentary to call them utopians, they ought rather to be called dystopians or cacotopians" (Robson 102). The Greek prefix "dys" signifies "ill", "bad" or "abnormal". Greek "topos" means "place" and Greek "ou" means "not". (Trahair 110)

Dystopian narratives generally criticise the existing social and political systems through speculating the dangerous consequences of those conditions and systems in the future. *Brave New Words* a dictionary of science fiction defines dystopia as an imagined society or state of affairs in which conditions are extremely bad especially in which these conditions result from the continuation of some current trend to an extreme. The real significance of dystopian works lies in its ability to analyse the trends existing in the society and to throw light on the dangers of extremely harmful or disastrous events.

The term 'utopia' that refers to an ideal state of society was coined by Sir Thomas More. Dystopia refers to a place that is the opposite of utopia. Some of the typical characteristics of dystopian

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fiction include concerns about technology, individuality, science, war and socialism. Dystopias come in various forms. There are technological dystopias, political and social dystopias, post apocalyptic and also feminist dystopias.

Technology in dystopian societies is often depicted as more advanced than our present technology. Our personal life is highly dependent on the technology that people have developed. Technological advancements have brought so many changes. Technology has advanced over years and it has changed the way we think and the way we live. It is important for people to understand and react to these shifting changes. We need look at the positives and the negatives that come with these changes. Dystopia provides the space and time to think and contemplate the real trends existing in the world and also to check if we are going towards the right path. Dystopian literature presents the readers with dystopian future societies and in which it shows what would happen if we did not mend our ways. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is a perfect example of a technological dystopia. In Bradbury's future world, technology is highly advanced. Technology dominates society.

In this futuristic world firemen deliberately set fire instead of putting out them. Books are banned here. If a book is discovered, it will be burned immediately by the firemen. The burning of books symbolises not only the destruction of traditions but also the destruction of independent thoughts. Nonstop distractions are used to entertain the people as well as to stop them from giving too much attention to the harsh realities of the society. The Air force jets pass overhead constantly and the fights between these Air Force jets are very common to these people who are living in the 2050s. People do not pay much attention to these jet fights because of their complete involvement in the world of entertainment.

"Three White Cartoon Clowns chopped off each other's limbs to the accompaniment of immense incoming tides of laughter. Two minutes more and the room whipped out of town to the jet cars wildly circling an arena bashing and backing up and bashing each other again." (Bradbury 94) The above mentioned example highlights the situation where people are unaware of what is going on around them because of their interest in entertainment programmes.

Andrew Ross and Paul Boyer note, anxiety over technological development stemmed largely from the appearance of the atomic bomb and its threat of potential mass destruction. In this futuristic world, entertainment is more important than anything else. There are giant television screens that are fitted to the walls of the house. In most of the houses all the four walls in the living room are occupied by these giant television screens. Mildred and Montag do not even have time to talk to each other. Therefore thinking about the Air Force jets fights and war is out of the question. Rodney A. Smolla describes the television as: "Large flat-screen televisions that occupy entire walls of the house, creating massive whole room entertainment centres" (Smolla 97). People are allowed to drive at very high speeds on the roads. People who walk on the road are considered as social misfits. Clarisse's uncle was punished for breaking the rules in the society. When others are immersed in the world of entertainment Clarisse finds time to contemplate her life and also to question the social evils and also to enjoy nature. She acts like a catalyst by arousing Montag's ability to question the social injustices. We often find this type of character in dystopian narratives. David Seed states, "In order to accelerate this process of realization some novelists use catalyst figures whose role is to function as a productive irritant in the protagonist's consciousness." (Seed 233)

Clarisse represents antagonism and difference in the story while all the others represent

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sameness and mass behaviour. Freud's comments in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* on group psychology and the "herd instinct" are in unison with Bradbury's thoughts in *Fahrenheit 451* (Freud 67). Clarisse, a cultivated individual is viewed as an outsider in this novel. Guy Montag becomes aware of the social injustices with the help of Clarisse.

Guy Montag is more like the protagonist of the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco. The protagonist Berenger was the last human being left on the earth overrun by rhinoceroses. Like Guy Montag many other dystopian protagonists also experience this existential nihilism. Many dystopian novels raise existential questions. In *The Maze Runner* also similar existential questions are found. While other dystopian texts raises existential questions such as 'What is the meaning of life?', 'Who am I?' and 'How should I live my life?' *Fahrenheit 451* tries to give answers to these questions. *Fahrenheit 451* talks about the importance of being 'you' and also being true to others. Truth is God and true love is the only thing that gives meaning to this meaningless world. It also talks about the importance of being one with nature and enjoying nature.

As Bradbury writes, "Overwhelmed by the frenetic speed and hypnotic appeal of the digital and virtual realities, we neglect genuine human relationships; we rush past the precious physical and sensory moments that bring substance to our being..." (89) We should understand both technology and ecology well enough in order to maintain democracy and also to move towards a better future. Literature gives us space to rehearse our reactions to the actions that terrify us. It makes us mentally prepared for such kinds of events. We can identify this feature of literature in *Fahrenheit 451* which brings out a world that has been agonised by war. It is set in an era of recurrent atomic war. *Fahrenheit 451* also expands on the anxiety over the atomic bomb and fear of a nuclear apocalypse. After Montag meets Granger, he thinks about his transformation from a destroyer of civilization to a builder of it. He realises that the fire would give as well as take. Montag understands that burning can be a constructive energy as well as an apocalyptic catastrophe. Bradbury's imagination of the future society in this novel is still relevant because of its focus on a single man who fights against social injustices.

We need to accept the fact that terrorism and war have regained much of our attention even after civilization and so much of technological advancements. The novel also concentrates on individualism and personal freedom. Bradbury highlights the wholeness and the freedom of the person. Man is a social being. Relatedness is necessary to everybody because without relations we are not humans. But we find a lack of effective interpersonal relationship in the novel. Mildred and Montag have no time for casual talks. Montag says "Nobody listens anymore. I can't talk to the walls. I just want someone to hear what I have to say." (82)

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess writes the following about the books: "It is indeed a rare pleasure these days to come across somebody that still reads, brother" (Burgess 8). Like Burgess Bradbury also feared that books would become obsolete. The novel also expresses Bradbury's great admiration for books. According to Wolfgang Iser, the literary text needs the reader's imagination. Imagination and critical thinking are very important for a democratic society. Except few people, all the others who live in this futuristic world accept book burning. These few people include Montag, Faber, Clarisse and the book people who live in the outskirts of the city. They are people of courage and intellect. They represent the indomitable human spirit in the novel.

Dystopias focus on particular cultural fears, anxieties and emotional relationships and also bring out the results. These fears, anxieties and emotional relationships form the atmosphere of the

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dystopian society. When Bradbury was asked about the motive of his novels, he responded "I don't try to describe the future. I try to prevent it" (Hoskinson 83)

The novel ends with an optimistic passage from the Book of Revelation: "And on either side of the river was there a tree of life which bore twelve manners of trouts and yielded her fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree were for the healings of nations" (158). It implies that rebirth of man's intellect can help in healing of the nations. In the conclusion, we can see Bradbury's optimism for a better society. Critical thinking and contemplation become very important and essential to move towards a better future. Dystopian literature not only examines the inequities in our society but it also answers some of the important existential questions and provides a creative space for open discussions.

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