



In the world of Dystopia- A theoretical analysis of *The Heart Goes Last* by Margaret Atwood

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ABSTRACT

Dystopia is a totalitarian or a degraded society. The dystopian society is characterized by human misery and oppression. The people of this society live in constant fear and unhappiness. Dystopian writings become popular in the twentieth century which witnessed various kinds of deprivation and sufferings. Dystopian narratives traditionally achieve their power by reflecting the dominant cultural anxieties of the era in which they were written. This research paper has taken up *The Heart Goes Last* by Margaret Atwood to examine the various dystopian aspects presented in it. *The Heart Goes Last*, written as the US economy slowly recovers from a recession, is a cautionary tale about our desire for security. The various dehumanizing and unpleasant pictures presented by Margaret Atwood are carefully analysed. The grave situation can happen to any society and it foreshadows the inescapable future to come.

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Introduction

The Heart Goes Last is a fascinating book written by Margaret Atwood. The writer has put the heart of human in this novel to a test in an extremely wonderful way which is as unrealistic as *The Handmaid's Tale* and as fictional like *The Blind Assassin*. Penguin Random House explains *The Heart Goes Last* as an extremely disturbing and wickedly funny book regarding the coming future in which the legal ones are locked up and the illegal people freely roam around. *The Heart Goes Last* is about a married couple, named Stan and Charmaine, who struggle hard for staying afloat in between social and economic collapse. The employment loss has forced both of them to start living in their car, which makes them vulnerable to the wandering gangs. They badly want to turn this circumstance around in which they are living as quickly as possible. The Positron Project in the town of Consilience looks like the solution to their issues and problems. No one is jobless and every person lives a comfortable life and gets a clean house to reside for 6 months out of 12 months. The people of Consilience should leave their residence on the alternate months and work as prisoners in the prison system of Positron. Once this phase of service in the jail is completed, they may go back to their homes.

Initially, this did not seem to be a big sacrifice in order to get a home to live and food to eat. However, when Charmaine gets involved romantically with a person who resides in their home during those months when she and Stan are in jail, a number of disturbing incidents happen, which risks the life of Stan. With every passing day, this project looks less like an answered prayer and more like a frightening prophecy fulfilled.

What is dystopia?

Dystopia would be described as anti-utopia; a place where nothing is perfect. Dystopian writings are the result of horrors of the twentieth century. Dystopia is a manner through which the writers share their worries regarding humanity and society.

They even warn the society members to focus towards the society in which they are living and to realize that how things can become worst from bad devoid of anyone knowing what has happened.

In this manner, most of the works of dystopia read as morality stories, intended at focusing on faults of the present and concluding those faults in the future. There is less left for the readers to evaluate; they are aware that which is wrong and which one is right. Dystopian fiction, in short, focuses on a contradicting group or individual in an imagined ideal society, conscious of inhumanity and enthusiastic in influencing a change. Utilizing this definition, the writers of such works have given every person the guidelines for overcoming and recognizing this system in their life.

Concept of dystopia in the light of *The Heart Goes Last*

A dystopia is a society or a community which is frightening or un-desirable. It is believed as not a good place. It is a futuristic imaginary world in which illusion of perfect social order and unjust societal control is maintained by totalitarian, moral, technological, bureaucratic and corporate control. In this novel, dystopia expert Margaret turns her uncomplicated world building, grim commentary and deft humor on the depths of hubris of humans to the jail, industrial complex, free will and love.

Main Characteristic of Dystopian Society in *The Heart Goes Last* include that there is limited freedom, independent thought, and information. Another feature of the society includes that there is a concept or figure-head is worshipped by the people of the society. Residents of that society are supposed to be under continuous observation and residents are scared of the outer world. The residents of that society live in a degraded condition; the real world is distrusted and banished. Residents of the society follow uniform expectations. Opposition and individuality are considered bad in that society. The society is a delusion of an ideal perfect world.

Every above mentioned characteristic can be observed in the Consilience (Claeys 107).

Life over there is largely controlled, with monitoring and bugging rife, and no contact with the outer world is permitted. There are a number of catches. First, their new house, the double community of Consilience and Positron, is basically a punitive society, whose leader is a Big Brotherish ruler, named Ed, whose people take alternate turns to become prisoners. They spend a month in the jail and another one in Levittown-like-suburbia which is around it. (Employment for every individual; if you are not a prisoner, then you are assisting in sustaining it). This is like Roach Motel where you may check-in however you cannot check-out. The town is established on 1950's ideal model. There are white picket barriers everywhere. Music is banned, there is no contact with the outside world and whatever they need (from clothes to dinnerware) they order it through official catalog. And there are continuous realizations of other agreements, some probably morbid. So this is dystopia.

This novel is a dystopian thriller in various manners. First of all, this story is about a criminal institution aimed at misusing the population. People in the town are pressurized by situations to join this criminal institution. Social collapse and breakdown of economic system has given people a reason to become part of this money-driven business. Within the realm of dystopian thrillers like *The Heart Goes Last*, the power defining human relations are important in deciding the resolution of storyline. This story shows higher tension, cascading revelations of plot and a disturbing end. These are the reasons that display that this is a dystopian thriller.

Themes of Dystopian Society in the Book

Control

There is some rough formula to the classic dystopian narratives employed in the novel that deals with the idea of control. An unjust government has limited the freedom of its people. Majority of the dystopian stories portray government like the only power: dominating and oppressive, controlling every sphere of life. The crucial circumstance of such power is to be universal, to infuse society's every layer and alter individuals, their thoughts and their actions. Therefore, to remain universal and have complete power over the lives of humans, discipline is used on every societal level as the most important tool for establishing supreme control. (Reber)

Discipline is used for controlling everyday lives of individuals in the shape of strict well-ordered schedule where the government recommends the actions of people (Reber) Therefore, the citizens of dystopia do not have any choice in whatever they do. They do not have any control on their own minds and bodies, and have become enslaved to the disciplinary system of the state. The same thing has been shown in Margaret's novel. Within the divided Positron/Consilience town, those who have signed up have been given a clean sub-urban home and a job if they switch their house after every alternate month and during that month they have to live in a prison; whereas, their alternates enjoy the freedom in return. There is no access to internet or to the outer world. No news goes out or gets in.

In the world of dystopia, bodies are shown as weak and powerless that involves discipline to attain its deceitful goal. It has been believed by Foucault that discipline is a powerful thing employed for governing the lives of individuals for producing practiced and subjected bodies, docile bodies which can be trained, shaped, and manipulated for state's benefit (Latham). Their minds are not only controlled and

indoctrinated by the powerful ideology, however their physical bodies are even disciplined to submission and taken away from their actual owners, as individuals are believed that they are state's property. Foucauldian interpretation of discipline is apparent in the further portion of control at Consilience which includes altering the brains of females (and at times males) by neurosurgery for making them extremely compliant and committed to their partners. It raises various queries regarding free will.

Freedom

This novel skewers a culture which trades liberty for the human comforts and sees jail as a profitable business, to earn money. It looks like Margaret is interested to write on for-profit jail scheme for just one reason, because it is occurring and it holds a lengthy story of occurring. Slaves were the source of energy in that world and one could become a slave in several manners - however one way among them was getting imprisoned for a criminal act. The basic query is that would you ever trade your liberty for the security? It is also a query which disturbs the story to the last page. But, Margaret is so much into the characters by this phase - their desires, their betrayals and erotic plays - that the broader implications of society are lost. So much time has been spent on the fulfilment of wishes and on the frustrations. The irrelevant tone of few last chapters weakens the bleak dystopian idea of the initial chapters.

Giving up your freedom for the good thing always looks like the correct thing to perform, however for some reasons these social experiments are always intended to become unacceptable at the end. Human beings perform bad things when some other person controls them. It looks like that it is not in our hands to react in a nice way when we are being controlled. We will always discover ways by which we can act up or act out. And we will say that we are not an animal in fact, humans. Freeing oneself in this case even appears impossible. But somehow things should be constructed. A person can have comfort and security, however cannot give up his/her freedom. You can't order someone to love you. It is not what a person wishes for. It must be reciprocated then it becomes all the more interesting.

Charmaine believed in the corporate boundaries. She likes Consilience, the town within prison, with its fifties aesthetic selected due to the reason that those were the days when individuals had identified themselves as being happy, although one of her responsibilities were to carry out euthanasia on the misfits. On the other hand, Stan runs the chicken farm of the prison. It does not appear that they are any more appropriate to one another, and possibly after short period of time at Positron, both will become sexually involved with their substitutes. From there, it is a strange spiral into blackmail and infidelity, counter-plot and plot.

Resistance

Any disobedient against the government is removed by indoctrination and propaganda, and imposed by continuous manipulation and surveillance of the past, for the reason that nothing may test the present tool of political control. But, some individuals can see the awful biases of the system of state and have the ability to speak against it. Protagonists realize things, understand their selves and reclaim their individualisms, to come out of their social and indoctrinated selves and recover their selves. Thus, this self-discovery act gives them a priceless chance to observe their selves. The protagonists get involved into resistance movements which are met with altered success levels. This novel tracks this formula

however with one basic difference: the persecutors are not the government, however the firm which operates and owns Consilience.

Economics

In the society of dystopia, the propaganda is utilized for controlling the people residing in that society. Dystopia's economic structures in media and literature have various differences, as the economy frequently directly links to the elements which the author is portraying like a source of oppression. The efforts against totalitarian government are predictably the theme in the works of Margaret Atwood. Almost by definition the genre is set in a futuristic society characterized by extreme oppression and despondence. Malevolent autocrats at the helms of totalitarian governments have, throughout our history, been responsible for innumerable travesties.

The works of Margaret Atwood feature extensive corporatism and privatization; both of them are the results of capitalism as a source of oppression. The world of dystopia is instead drawn-out roughly, and seems just to apply to the portions of the country, as then there are several references to more prosperous areas.

The world in this novel is ending because of a catastrophic economic breakdown however not due to some natural disaster. It is brutal and quick. Ms. Margaret writes "the whole card castle, the whole system, fell to pieces, trillions of dollars wiped off the balance sheet like fog off a window". Finance capitalism has driven itself over the edge. United States is a rust-belt. After the economic collapse in US, Stan and Charmaine faced many difficulties the way others have faced. They have become unemployed and lost their homes and are surviving in their vehicles and consuming scavenged leftovers, scared of wandering gangs in the dangerous and lawless streets. There are several solutions to this chaotic situation, and we are aware of one already: Prison-for-profit. However, in an effort to escape their terrible situations, the couple becomes part of the Positron Project which is a project of prison. However with a clever innovation: this is a prison planned to serve, appeal to and utilize people who are not criminals. They are more ample as compared to the prisoners and easier to handle too. This kind of unsavory and plain funny reasoning is abundant in the book. This makes it more pleasant sort of dystopian satire as compared to the obsessively dark material which is common these days.

One more theme observed in this aspect is the hunt for economic equality. To some level, a hunt for this equality is legal as it tries to allow the poor and lessen misery. If taken to extreme level, this hunt makes a dystopia in which extra rules intended to raise the status of worst-off have the equally opposite influence. The novel discovers this idea in detail and features absolute absurd rules which are rationalized over helping and equality. Every person is having job in Positron to work as prisoner a month and the next month as a staff. You receive everything which you want however on alternate days you go to the prison and you are not permitted to know or meet your alternates - reside in your home and eat off nicely. Positron motivates economic efficacy of housing 2 families in one. Stan goes on a conference where a seller needs the viewers to "think of the savings, with every dwelling serving two sets of residents! It was time-share taken to its logical conclusion".

As a result, the cost of the members' less commodious housing is negligible. This seems like a solution of eradicating

the poverty being caused by economic downturn; however the solution is powered by oppression and sacrifices.

In the world of Margaret, now that imprisonment is no more a punishment, reform, or safeguarding the people from the predators, jails are money spinners. Due to the reason that jails began running as private businesses, this clarifies that Positron is a higher-up. They were regarding the profit limits for the preplanned prison-meat suppliers and the employed guard and so on. However, this appears to be dig at real profitable jails that are still run by the tax-payers and a wider economic result is a remaining loss.

In the initial scenes, Margaret gives us a reminder that the economic system which we have are vulnerable to huge losses and in this way her hypothetical truth is very reasonable. The connections between our world and of Consilience are not as persuasive: it does not have any vivid detail about the inhabitants and the town. Charmaine says "everything is so spruced up...like a town in a movie", that equals to our own experience of it. The government of United States is visibly not present all though the story. The outer world Consilience is an uncontrolled shamble, with people left to protect themselves.

Loss of Identity

Dystopia majorly portrays the difference between ambition and mutual aims of state or individual identity that suppresses or crushes expressions of an individual leading to loss of his/her identity. Creativity or personal expression and individuality are banned whereas physical abilities of people became the only definition of the individualities. The book explores loss of individual identity in the dystopian world. This novel even provides a huge section of satire; this is the category taken to its boundaries, complete with sinister knitting, brain wiping and sexbots which have never appeared in any other book before. And it is Margaret, puts in variety of gender and sex politics. This book is a proof to the person and it is correct not to be enslaved. In the Positron world, there is no single hint of personal identity or individual rights. The only value that a person has so far is to serve society; those people who are very much old are regarded as useless. The occupation of a person is selected by the officials. To moreover motivate the attitude that a person is just a drone whose only duty is to be enslaved and to serve others, the words 'my' and 'I' have been substituted by 'our' and 'we', and the pronouncement of single pronoun is considered as a criminal act and the punishment for this is burning the person alive.

Walsh fairly declares by diminishing the feeling of individual identity, society of dystopia makes it possible that average man will combine his weak identity with the social ones and cease for demanding that he should be called by his name rather than a number. The mutual power and mentality of the state attacks directly the minds and bodies of dystopian and make them robots which are supposed to only work and live as the state says. The evil within dystopia is normally faceless, all-including state, belief system, or bureaucracy which restricts or annihilates some values the readers think are crucial to their ability and the ability of characters to work as fully honored humans. The people of dystopia live a highly regimented life; they are deprived of any feelings or personal relationships; marriage and sex are believed in several instances as totally for reproduction, in other instances, as a pastime or distraction. State is responsible for educating and bringing-up the children and they are educated to be honest

and fulfill the given duties properly devoid of challenging or questioning the system.

In the management of prison, no person is what he/she appears. For example, Brett Cooke debates that dystopian plot "sets planned social engineering against what passes for human nature", rendering human beings to the status of slaves. Thus, other critics such as Michael Amey evaluates the destruction of human freedom and emotions to the state control and underlines how it decreases the originality of individuals and raises uniformity, forming dystopian society into single unit where people act and think in similar ways, giving ideal circumstances for exploitation of state.

Neuro-tech, bio-tech and capitalism are becoming similar: identity, only existing like a kind of polite back-leakage from this money-driven method, might be best concluded in the Stan's curious observation: "Would Doris Day's life have been different," he thinks, "if she'd called herself Doris Night? Would she have worn black lace, dyed her hair red, sung torch songs?" So far it's a less silly query than it appears.

Family and Love

The people of dystopia live a highly regimented life; they are deprived of any feelings or personal relationships; marriage and sex are believed in several instances as totally for reproduction, in other instances, as a pastime or distraction (Hintz, and Ostry). Fictional dystopia, like *Fahrenheit 451* and *Brave New World* have eliminated the family and use continuous attempts to keep it away from establishing itself again like a social organization. The idea of family within this dystopian book is somehow alike (Hintz, and Ostry). Kennon revealed that the theme of displacement is present everywhere in the dystopian novels. Protagonists were forced out of their comfortable homes where they were safeguarded by their adults and parents to a place where they had to rely on their own for some reasons. Every protagonists search for freedom for his/herself and every member within their society wish for a perfect place beyond what they really are.

It is usual in the literature of dystopia that rulers have weakened the family bonds. Here we observe similar dynamics. Margaret draws out her plan as actively as spider, making a complex web which entangles Charmaine and Stan in a confused counter-betrayal and betrayal game including manufacturing of sex bots, identity theft, espionage, blackmail, trafficking of human organs and extra-marital affairs. They like to search for the solutions of their own and want to throw away the status quo. They want to risk their lives in order to make the society a better place to live.

Margaret has many things to say regarding human sexuality and the love's nature. As other people have said in their reviews, this is a real cautionary story. This story shows us our self-indulgent and selfish side, showing our continuous hunger for guarantees that we are in the correct place, performing the correct thing, sleeping next to the right individual and we are happy. Self-doubt is disheartening. However, wherever we are today, whatsoever we are doing right now, it is by choice. We have made this happen. And we might make it happen again. The irritating suspicions can be a pain, however they are our suspicions. Substituting individual, personal doubt with a cold manufactured doubt forced from without must never become interesting.

How the book is different from other dystopian literature?

What makes this novel different from some other dystopian formulas such as *Brave New World*, *We*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *1984* is that Positron is actually an utopian solution to the issue of dystopia which then deteriorates and becomes

dystopia, once again. Over here, the constant degradation of Consilience is significant to the plot. This degradation along with dissolution of Charmaine and Stan focuses on the message that is a little bit different from the old dystopia: that it's a human fault instead of state or extremist government (thus, a little choice of humanity) which is accountable for dystopia. As said by Stacy May Fowles about the struggling relation of Charmaine and Stan "picture-perfect boredom begets self-manufactured strife". Where usually the protagonist of dystopia appears to heroically rage against dehumanized and alien government of oppression, Margaret emphasizes rather than on an unimportant broken relationship in the core of progressively absurd, insignificant dysfunctional dystopia. She is discovering the foundation and flawed nature of humans which has caused her making world to its degraded condition.

Conclusion

One of Ms. Atwood's great strengths as a novelist, along with her deep understanding of psychology and her ability to reflect our worst fears and anxieties back to us, is her way of leavening even the grimmest scenarios with dark, impish humor. Short chapters shift between Stan's point of view and Charmaine's but contribute to a larger structure revealing a study in opposites - good and evil, innocence and experience, male and female gender stereotypes, freedom and security, control and anarchy, fantasy and reality, sex and death, each opening up into the other like a kaleidoscope. Not only does Atwood sketch out an all-too-possible dystopian future but she also looks to the past, tapping into archetypes from fairy tales and myth, giving the novel a resonance beyond satire. It is a cautionary tale about our desire for security. Although it does lose its focus, the questions that it asks are the sort of questions that our society will need to answer in the coming decades.

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