

Postmodern Dystopian Fiction: An Analysis of Bradbury's '*Fahrenheit 451*'

Maria Anwar¹

Abstract

Postmodernism as a literary movement is said to have started after the WWII, when man lost all hope in the so-called scientific progress and advancement, because of the range of destruction it caused in the form of the World Wars. Relentless slaughter of human lives and psychological trauma left the people in a state of constant fear and distress. Bradbury in his dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* explores the destructive side of technology and dictatorship, which can deprive people of a normal life and basic freedom. T.V is also one of the mediums through which we are psychologically conditioned into thinking in particular ways; it has also created emotional distance among families. Global surveillance has made most of the world paranoid about internet and technological gadgets, which are nothing more than spyware for those in power. Bradbury in this novel describes how books can take us back to a civilized time, and that letting people not read is one of the worst crimes in history.

Keywords: Dystopia, Paranoia, Postmodern fiction, Bradbury, Post-war fiction.

Postmodern literature is concerned with a deconstruction of existing factual knowledge and shows how truth is relative and language is unreliable in conveying the intended meaning. Postmodern writers thus question established dogmas, and show a sense uncertainty, unreliability, and anti-authoritarian tendency. The rejection of the grand narratives, use of playful irony, humor, and temporal distortion are only a few of several techniques that can be said to define postmodernist writing. Lyotard (1979) defines it as "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards met narratives." (*La Condition Postmodern: Rapport Sur le Savoir*). Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. The boundaries between genres, facts, and fiction are blurred and nothing is definite.

Dystopian fiction like Bradbury's is rooted in scientific plausibility. Science has now become an integral part of the life more than before because of the way technology has entered every walk of life. In our fast-paced, technology-driven world, it is difficult to determine where science ends and where fiction begins, the wildest fantasies of science fiction writers have a way of becoming scientific fact. Zipes (1983), while defining "dystopian fiction" tells that literary utopias, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), after which the entire genre was named, presented fictional depictions of societies that were clearly superior to the one in which the author lived. Utopian fiction of 16th and 17th century exhibited a strong belief in the social benefits of advancing technology and progress. Contrarily, the postwar era compelled the emergence of dystopian or anti-utopian fiction, where we see an apocalyptic version of future world with man taken over by the machine and technology playing havoc with human life. Information science, atomic energy, global surveillance, rapid mechanization and weapons of mass destruction for global warfare called for science fiction to become postmodern; *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is a classic example of dystopian science fiction, a subgenre of utopian literature and a literary form that emerged in the postmodern age.

¹ Student of M.Phil English Literature, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. Phone: +92 03440564206, E-mail: maria.anwar06@gmail.com

Seed (1994) in his article "The Flight from the Good Life: "Fahrenheit 451" in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias" says that 20th century science fiction looks to the future not with the optimism of those who believe that man's increasing mastery of nature will bring greater happiness but with the pessimism of those who believe that the more man controls nature, the less he controls himself. It was after World War I there was an intense backlash against the very idea of utopianism, which took the form of dystopian novels. Dystopian novels show that any attempt at establishing utopia will only make matters much worse. The great works of this tradition, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), establish a pattern that is clearly reflected in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. The tone of dystopia is of despair and the feel it gives is that of fear. Dystopian fiction of the 20th and 21st century emerged out of many doubts and concerns that the modern civilization experienced after the horrors of the World Wars and the destructive side of technological advancement. *Fahrenheit 451* thus shows a consumer culture completely divorced from political awareness, the characters' lives are dark, scary and cold, there's a background noise of passing bombers, a fear of nuclear war and Mildred is shown taking mood elevating pills or tranquillizers always glued to the T.V to fight her plastic, empty existence.

Bradbury developed *Fahrenheit 451* during the late 1940s and published it in 1950 just after World War II, coinciding with America's growing fear of communism. His theme of censorship and forced conformity, where books are forbidden and burned - shows the irrationality of the 20th century where people in power suppressed human free thinking and individuality. *Fahrenheit 451* has firemen perform the opposite task of starting fires than putting them off, people are cleverly manipulated into thinking that books are useless, that reading spreads unrest in various social sects and causes people to be unhappy. This manipulation and ideological conditioning takes place mostly through television along with other forms of media.

The Government exercises its power by controlling information in the computerized society and social order is maintained through oppression in the form of effacement of personal freedom: Beatty tells Montag how everyone is made to live happily "Not everyone is born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other, then all is happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against" (Bradbury, p. 28). Comparing this censorship and control theme to history, we find that during World War II, Hitler and the Nazis had similarly banned and burned hundreds of thousands of books, using new technologies they attempted one of the largest mind control experiments by setting up state controlled schools and a propaganda machine which censored all ideas and information in public media. The U.S. government also responded to its fear of growing communist influence with attempts to censor the media and its productions, including literature. In the McCarthy era, authorities attempted to harness what it saw as communist sympathies among authors including Hollywood producers, and the FBI investigated the potential disloyalty of U.S. citizens just like we see Montag questioned for his disloyalty to state law and showing sympathy to professor Faber. Anti-intellectual Federal Government restricted the free speech of judges and university professors by requiring loyalty oaths, in Bradbury's novel too, we find Faber hiding from such absurd laws and Granger seeking refuge in the outskirts of the city with other book-loving intellectuals who are being persecuted.

Fahrenheit 451 is an account of the dilemmas of a population ruled by dictators; we see a similar theme in *1984* by George Orwell which describes psychological oppression that dictatorship enforces upon its non-cooperators. Orwell's discolored, depressed, ugly, sterile, loveless, totalitarian world of *1984* which "hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light. Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" Happy Clarisse, who's unable to survive, stands for the diminishing natural world of sensual joy in comparison to an unhappy Montag, who represents the automated robotic man of the dehumanized mechanical world. Montag's life is devoid of domestic and marital bliss though his house is fully equipped with technology. His house is described as a "mausoleum" and he lives a brainless existence never wondering why he's a fireman, or what books contain. Mildred is more like a zombie, with thimbles in her ears all the time, with no real family; she only interacts with the television people and is estranged from her husband. Human life is dispensable like "disposable tissue paper" just as Clarisse is sadly killed by a speeding car. For every progressive step in technology that improves human life, man pays a price of the decadence of spiritual life like the mentioned characters.

In today's electronic age satellites, computers, and television bombard education, programmers, advertisements, and incredible amounts of information to assimilate or act upon, thus numbing human existence as we see in Mildred's character. Mindless entertainment like T.V has replaced recreational free thinking and healthy pursuits. Secondly, man is constantly watched and traced through satellites, internet and telecom devices with no privacy concerns just like Montag is suspected by the Mechanical Hound, pictured by helicopters and chased when he resists conforming to laws. Here we notice postwar political climate that fostered xenophobia, blacklisting, and censorship. The Government goes to absurd limits to exercise power and control, violence is used in the name of keeping peace and there's a sense of rush in people's life. Speedy cars like "Beetles" run over innocents like Clarisse, people never feel the rain on their skin; they don't watch flower beds on roadsides nor notice billboards, society is devoid of the Emersonian values of friendship, self-reliance, and nature. We as readers are shown that there's an existential anguish and emptiness about the technological world of machines that takes away the warmth of life, Montag and Clarisse experience this anguish. These issues of the postmodern era found a perfect medium in science fiction for their portrayal, which is flexible as a genre to incorporate dystopian themes pertaining to an automated future.

Fahrenheit 451 is representative of postmodern literature in many ways. Starting with the form and narrative style, it's Meta fictional, as it blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. The author constantly debates the worth of books and reading, while being a writer of fiction himself, he addresses the audience by commenting on the novel's events at times as a third person omniscient narrator or by using Montag as a mouth piece. This is also called authorial intrusion or self reflection, where the writer breaks in the narrative to comment on the story. For instance after burning down an old woman's house full of books, Montag tells his wife how that woman chose to burn herself alive with her books, he wonders that there must be something in those books that he can't imagine and that made the old woman stay in the burning house, "Last night I thought about all the kerosene I've used in the past ten years. And I thought about books ... for the first time I realized that a man was behind each one of the books" ... "It took some man a lifetime maybe to put some of his thoughts down, looking around at the world and life.." (Bradbury, p. 25). Disintegration or unconventional plot is also a characteristic of postmodern meta-fiction that can be seen in *Fahrenheit 451*. The story starts in the middle or *media res* with Montag burning books and finding pleasure in it, then the story goes to the past in flashbacks when Montag thinks of his first meeting with Faber, "he found himself thinking of the green park a year ago...when he had seen that old man in black suit hide something quickly in his coat". (Bradbury, p.34). So the plot isn't chronological like traditional ones.

The genre itself is a blend of popular culture and high art, Bradbury blends dystopia, fantasy and science fiction when he talks of a futuristic America with Mechanical Hounds, 3D interactive televisions, fireproof houses, seashell radio and the looming danger of a nuclear war. Science fiction used to be a part of pulp magazines and considered trashy, but in modern times where science and technology drive the world, science fiction has achieved the status of mainstream literature. The postmodern crisis of identity is at the core of *Fahrenheit 451*. As the protagonist learns from a series of mentors and teachers, he sees his own identity melding with that of his instructors. The novel shows Montag's journey of discovering his true self by trying to pin the motive behind his actions and attaining self-awareness. Montag while burning books at the old woman's house tells himself that "You weren't hurting anyone, you were hurting only things...there was nothing to tease your conscience later" (Bradbury, p. 17). Montag often feels his identity splitting; as he hears Clarisse talking through him, or he's got Faber in his ear, or he imagines his hands acting of their own accord. He feels as if part of him agrees with what Faber and Clarisse say while a part of him is unaware performing professional duty; this division of mind compels him to reevaluate his actions.

The book employs irony, humour and play to get its message across. The whole book is based on the irony that a firefighter, whose job it is to destroy books is the character who tries to preserve them later in the story. Montag discovers himself and the value of books. Mildred plays the role of "homemaker" for a T.V show, while she's totally estranged from her home life and her husband. People are jailed for driving carefully, as well as for gaining knowledge through books in a civilized society because the Government considers it "unlawful" according to its motives. Violence is used to keep peace and social balance. We find it humorous that Montag's wife keeps audio-seashells in her ears all the time and he says, "Wasn't there an old joke about a wife who talked so much on the telephone that her desperate husband ran to the nearest store to call her to ask what was for dinner" (Bradbury, p. 20).

Puns and language play is evident when we find that the book-loving Professor is named Faber after a publishing company, and that Montag was actually a paper manufacturing brand in the past. Deconstructionist approach is also evident in this book when Clarisse tells Montag that in the past firemen were actually putting off fires, so the truth that he knows is questionable. The novel's form is unconventional, has numerous allusions that render it layers of meaning and the language is poetic, which shows that Bradbury experimented with the traditional or pre-modern form of speculative fiction.

The book is filled with a persistent sense of paranoia as Montag's world closes in on him, he's targeted by the Mechanical Hound who behaves oddly towards him, and then Beatty drops by his house out of the blue and gives him a lecture on the dangers of book reading though Montag never told him he had stolen books. His wife Mildred, whom he trusts, betrays him by calling the firemen to his own house, and finally he's chased to Faber's house by the Mechanical Hound. The postmodern characteristics of this piece of writing give it a form that best suits its themes and thus proves that writers will always find ways to portray their ever changing world around them through literature.

Works Cited

- Bradbury, R. (2013). *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Flieger, J.A. (1997). Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye. *New Literary History*, 28 (1), 87-109.
- Grewell, G. (2001). Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future. *Rocy Mountaina Review of Language and Literature*. 55, (2), 25-47. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1348255>
- Lyotard, J.F. (1986). *Defining the Postmodern*. London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Schwartz, S. (1971). Science Fiction: Bridge between the two cultures. *The English Journal*, 60, 1043-105. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/14025>
- Seed, D. (1994). The Flight from the Good Life: "Fahrenheit 451" in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias. *Journal of American Studies*. 28,(2), 225-240. Retrieved 23 Oct, 2014 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40464168>
- Zipes, J. (1983). Mass degradation of humanity and massive contradictions in Bradbury. E. S. Rabkin, M. H. Greenberg & D. O. Joseph (Eds.), *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (pp. 182-199). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.