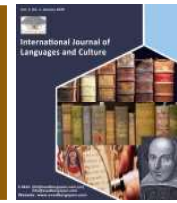




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Short Article

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The Anti-utopian Subtext In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Abstract

Macbeth (1606) is often considered William Shakespeare's most mature perception of evil within human nature and also a play falling within that period of the dramatist's life that probably saw a crisis in personal realms, a hypothesis that also includes the other three tragedies within this cycle. Centering around a hero-villain who relentlessly murders and creates an anti-utopian state-of-affairs in the Scottish kingdom, this paper would like to unveil traces of dystopian impulses in the play. The narrative not only shows the presence of a massive surveillance force maintained by the protagonist, but following M. Keith Booker's assertion that any text with social or political criticism has the possibility of dystopian readings, depicts entire Scotland reeling under a despotic monarch after the death of a kindly one. As such, *Macbeth* is not only the story of a "vaulting ambition" but also that of the "tragedy of a nation" whose society has become 'dystopian' for the time being, witnessing novel methods of surveillance, information control and the genesis of new subjectivities.

Keywords: *Dystopian, Evil, Utopian, Narrative*

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Discussions abound when the concept of a dystopian setting is announced—the immediate responses vary from that of dystopian writings being the most telling phenomenon of contemporary Western literature and culture (Booker, 2012), to that of the fundamental fact that "[d]ystopian literature packs a powerful punch, both in its intention and its prospects, particularly in our day and age" (Dundar, 2013). It has been often argued that a dystopia is not much a genre of writing per se but an "oppositional and critical energy or spirit" (Booker, 1994) and that many of the works that show social or political criticisms harbor the possibility of dystopian readings (1994).

Hamlet already seems to have much of the 'dystopian' spirit in it owing to the large scale of surveillance resorted to by various characters in the play. In Tom Stoppard's re-telling of the play in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), the two characters playing minor roles in the original play by Shakespeare are made not only aware of the existential crisis overlapping them, but also of the inevitable progress of a dark force that reinforces the idea of a dystopian setting.¹ Even in *Hamlet* the protagonist's gradual awareness that Denmark may well be compared to an "unweeded garden" has undertones of the imminent violence that will overtake the nation and when social as well the imperial fabric shall collapse in a post-apocalyptic fashion. This notion of being "unweeded", in a trash bin or a dump site has echoes of the dystopian novel *Trash* (2010) authored by Andy Mulligan where the central characters live off culling assorted items of a huge trash site in a fictional city of Behala in a distant future. While Hamlet finds it difficult to set

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matters right and is consumed in the vortex of incidents that overtake all, the three boys in the novel by Mulligan find their way out of this trash. They transcend this dystopian world and find a niche of their own. This is something that Hamlet fails to do and is consumed by the garden's 'weeds' that remind us of a dystopian state of affairs. Thus, what links the two texts is the dystopian discourse that they generate in their won fashion. If the end of *Hamlet* shows the Senecan elements of bloodshed with virtually no one living in the royal clan of Denmark, *Trash* shows scenes of torture and violence as well that attests to its dystopian settings. In Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) [*Ubu the King*], that is often cited as one of the first important work belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd, we have traces of Shakespearean plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* that contribute to the play's dark vision of human existence. So does Vishal Bharadwaj's splendid cinematic adaptation of *Macbeth* in *Maqbool* (2004) that depicts the Mumbai underworld and the nefarious game of power politics that attests to its "fallen" or 'dystopian' status.

In *Macbeth*, the setting of Scotland and the initial rule by a kind, saintly monarch and his subsequent murder and the taking of the throne by the thane of Glamis to the exclusion of the rightful heir Malcolm creates a dictatorship of sorts in the nation. This rise of a new regime is ruthlessly controlled by resorting to novel methods of surveillance, a point that this paper strives to discuss, along with resultant methods of information control that heightens the anti-utopian tone further. After the monarch Duncan is killed, Macbeth assumes the throne with consequences that seek to control movements and resort to a mechanism of bodily control. He instructs his comrade Banquo not to miss the feast, that, ironically, he does not miss. While Macbeth seeks to control the movements of characters and sees to it that everyone attends his coronation, Macduff does not, while Malcolm and Donaldbain flee. But the ghost of the murdered Banquo 'returns' and haunts the coronation. Before the Banquet scene, Macbeth meets the three murderers and tries to know to what extent have they been instrumental in furthering the surveillance apparatus that he has created. Throughout the play, this eye on bodily movements and the propensity to contain them heightens the anti-utopian tone of the play. The three murderers report on the first mechanism that they adopt with regard to this—murder of a dissident, a marked tendency of a dystopian or autocratic form of government. Seen in one way, *Macbeth* is a play that not only shows a villain-hero crushing everyone within the unrelenting state apparatus, but also one that, within the very play itself, shows social and political criticism at work, a hallmark of a dystopian text as per Booker:

MACBETH: ...

There's blood upon thy face.

FIRST MURDERER: It's Banquo's, then.

MACBETH: 'Tis better thee without than he within.

Is he dispatched?

FIRST MURDERER: My lord, his throat is cut. That I did for him. MACBETH: Thou art th' best of the cutthroats.

Yet he's good that did the like for Fleance; If thou didst it, thou art the nonpareil.

.....

FIRST MURDERER: Ay, my good lord, safe in a ditch he bides, With twenty trenched gashes on his head,

The least a death to nature. (3.4.14-28; emphases added)

In this context, the comments of Michel Foucault as regards the modern means employed in surveillance may be quoted:

This enclosed, segmented space, *observed at every point*, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which *the slightest movements are supervised*, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and the periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, *in which each individual is constantly located, examined* and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism (1975, 197; emphases added)

In the beginning of the play, Macbeth along with Banquo meets the three witches who resort on a means of information control. While the protagonist is hailed as the "thane of Glamis", a fact that is attested in real life of the character, his being "the thane of Cawdor" and the "king hereafter" is not grounded in present reality. This lack of complete information leads to disastrous consequences in the play, as we later see. Duncan is murdered and Malcolm and Donaldbain flee, and Scotland turns into a veritable dystopia where any subversive actions are ruthlessly suppressed by Macbeth. This method of information control and the disastrous consequences of the same may also be witnessed in a motion picture like *The Matrix* series. Neo, an employee of the Meta cortex Corporation has been denied the basic

fact that he has not been living in 1999 AD, as he seems to believe as what he knows is but an elaborate hoax, an illusory world created by “The Matrix”, a digital system that has gained power in the year 2199 AD. Only a few people who live in a subterranean city called Zion know this. Neo is taken by three people and meets Morpheus, the leader of the resistance against the machines who tells him that he has been denied the vital information that the world that he feels he has been living in is long dead. People are fighting a desperate war with the intelligent machines that they created in the beginning of the 21st century that has created a computer-simulated dream world called the “Matrix”.

This denial of vital information in the play by the bard also keeps the protagonist within a state of the virtual, Matrix-like world created by the witches and he is led to believe that he is the rightful monarch, while in reality, Malcolm is the true one. Also, the sleepwalking scene where Lady Macbeth commits suicide is one of those cases wherein the boundary between reality and illusion is blurred with nefarious consequences. This brings in the birth of new subjectivities and the gradual change of the stable, cognitive framework once possessed by the central characters, a staple of many a dystopian narratives. Both Macbeth as well as Lady Macbeth fall prey to the autocratic regime that they create—while Macbeth loses sleep as he had murdered sleep literally, Lady Macbeth is the worst sufferer as she is crushed within this inexorable mechanism of a despotic state apparatus that leaves no one intact, either physically or psychologically. Shakespeare, thus, in many ways, shows the real political world and the power discourse that it generates that straddles within both the Elizabethan and the Jacobean regime as a conceptual grid that has its own dystopian underpinnings.

M. Keith Booker in his *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, as it has been already mentioned, points out that any text that shows social or political criticisms harbors the inherent possibility of dystopian readings (1994, 4). Such elements are rife in *Macbeth*. In the conversation between Malcolm and Macduff, we have a picture of a nation cut by civil and political strife that attests to its anti-utopian nature:

MACDUFF: O Scotland, Scotland!

MALCOLM: If such a one be fit to govern, speak. I am as I have spoken.

MACDUFF: Fit to govern? No, not to live! O nation miserable,

With an untitled tyrant, bloody-scepter'd! When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again, Since that the truest issue of thy throne

By his own interdiction stands accurs'd,

And does blaspheme his breed! ... (4.3. 102-109)

The starting point of the disorder in the play is the moment when Macbeth meets the witches—the meeting takes place in a “fallen”, desolate landscape wherein the protagonist along with Banquo is revealed about the future state of affairs. Macbeth will be king and Banquo’s sons would be kings as well. But before Macbeth can get the vital information as to how the prophesied metamorphosis would unfold, the witches vanish. In a dystopian fashion wherein vital information is often withheld², the witches too leave the desolate heath and it is left for the duo to figure out what to do in the present state of affairs. Even in the beginning of the play, the violence and civil strife that will be played against the backdrop of the Scottish kingdom rendering it anti-utopian in the long run is announced. The imminent disorder in the physical and the metaphysical realms can be seen in the beginning of the play itself:

FIRST WITCH: Where shall we meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH: When the hurly-burly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won. (1.1, 1-4)

The anti-utopian tone of the play is heightened further by the fact that the protagonist, after ascending the throne resorts to the keeping of a huge surveillance apparatus. The murderers, even Seyton and the soldier who bring news of the advancing army of Malcolm and the news of Lady Macbeth’s death are a part of that surveillance system. Macbeth’s character undergoes a strange metamorphosis after he usurps the throne; so does that of Lady Macbeth, who, unable to take the prick of conscience in the end of the play, is taken to sleep walking. Little or no indication is provided about this ailment that she suffers from in the beginning of the drama, as nothing is told about the problem of insomnia that Macbeth confronts after he has established the ‘dystopian’ regime in Scotland. The beginning of the play is replete with instances wherein Macbeth has been praised as a “valiant cousin” by Duncan, but as it progresses, the mental metamorphosis of both these characters that may be seen to be a silent function of the anti-utopian regime that they have endeavored to establish becomes a point worthy to be analyzed as one that sees the birth of new subjectivities.

Such examples can be readily seen in anti-utopian narratives. In the dystopian film *V for Vendetta* (2006), the character “V” who has been subject to experiments after the Norse Fire Party comes to power in a futuristic Britain exhibits behavioural patterns that are ridiculous and insane. His chief aim is to kill the autocratic “High Chancellor” and

topple the government on Guy Fawkes's day. Presumably a normal human being, "V" is made into a rebellious and even violent character who gets killed but manages to accomplish his job. Similarly, in Antony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), the character Alex, leader of a gang of thugs who delight in sexual violence is administered the Ludovico technique that is meant to render him docile and subservient to the whims of the society at large. Such behavioral changes and "birth" of new subjectivities and conceptual frameworks are the result of the anti-utopian era in which such characters live. The tragedy of Macbeth and his wife thus, stems from this fact that they have fabricated conditions that have been conducive to negative changes in their mental dispositions. Diverging from the above-mentioned examples where characters have been forced to *adopt* unique subjectivities, *Macbeth* shows a villain-hero and his wife who have to embrace radical changes in their emotional and mental makeup in the context of 'dystopian' era as depicted in the play and that they have endeavored actively to create.

In one way, the protagonist in the play murders his own sovereign and admits in the end that he cannot sleep, for he has "murder'd" sleep. In a similar fashion, Lady Macbeth cannot sleep as well, and she has taken to sleep walking as a loose substitute. This is a trend that informs the entire play—in the night when Duncan is murdered, Scotland could not sleep and had to endure the rigors of waking. The old man who reports the cosmic disturbance in the night the kind king was slain reports that horses ate each other and hideous things happened:

OLD MAN: 'Tis unnatural,

Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last, A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.

ROSS: And Duncan's horses—a thing most strange and certain!—Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out, Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would Make war with mankind.³ (3.1, 10-18)

Similarly, in the famous Porter scene, there are indications that noblemen like Ross and others could not sleep as well. Following the murder of the sovereign, the entire kingdom of Scotland is plagued by a mysterious absence of sleep and rest.

The degradation of physical aspects of nature that may be attributed to the killing of Duncan reinforce this dystopian ring further. In the very beginning, the witches meet in a blasted heath, Macbeth and Banquo return from a battlefield strewn with corpses, the air is still thick with a dark blanket after the killing of the king and Macbeth meets the witches again in a cave. The sheer absence of natural beauty that can only be glimpsed when Duncan visits Macbeth's castle gives way to a scene where little or no hope of regeneration rests. In the Banquet scene, when the murderers report the death of Banquo, the image of a boggy ditch in which Banquo lies dead conjures up notions of a post-lapsarian existence, an important parameter for the analysis of any anti-utopian work (Rabkin, 1983)—from this moment till the very end, *Macbeth* is replete with images that conjure up a "fallen" status—both of the kingdom of Scotland as well as that of Nature. Coupled up with this are the associated notions of blood and darkness that inform the play as a powerful signifier:

MACBETH:

I am in blood

Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,

Which must be acted ere they may be scanned? (3.5. 138-142)

This theme of the degradation of nature attributed to the foul acts by Macbeth reinforce the anti-utopian tone of the play further. Coupled with this are further hints of this theme in the Porter scene. After the killing of the kind king, the audience confronts the Porter. Essentially intended to be a comic interlude, this scene brings in some essentially degrading aspects of Scottish reality. Frequent references to the farmer who had hanged himself for the expectation of plenty in the harvesting season, the dig on the English tailor who would have shamelessly stolen out of the French hose suggest a situation of deprivation and sterility that may have plagued Macbeth's Scotland during his reign. Dystopian tendencies can be perpetrated not only by the intervention of a conscious few, but also by external circumstances that dictate upon a given sector or population. A quick look at the history of Scottish agriculture during the Middle Ages shows the near-absence of any Roman towns and the possible benefits accruing from the same, the uncertain weather and the lack of communication to be the crucial factors for the negation of the very idea of plenitude during harvest seasons. This is reflected in the speech by the drunken Porter who shows the anti-utopian and hellish nature of the

castle wherein Duncan has been slain. In one way, the castle becomes a veritable microcosm for entire Scotland, reflecting how terrible can be the consequences of one man that leads to an anti-utopian aura in the entire kingdom.

Indeed, *Macbeth* is a play that time and again rehearses this paucity of food supply that gets metamorphosed into the “vaulting ambition” of the protagonist who expresses his concern over power in terms of food and consumption of daily fluids. In the excellent essay “Appetite and Ambition: The Influence of Hunger in *Macbeth*”, Katherine Knowles gives a stock of the food supply and its recurrent shortage in the Middle Ages and how this abiding concern over food and its concomitant scarcity in the lives of the common folk in Scotland forms a discourse of scarcity in the play that gets transmuted in the various discourse markers that the characters utter in the play as speech. The author of the paper opines that the villain-hero’s desire to keep his kingdom and the fear of losing the same is expressed in a language couched in terms of deprivation vis-a- vis the supply of food.

Juan de Mariana in the article “Whether it is Right to Destroy a Tyrant” speaks in eloquent terms as to what exactly ought to be done if a prince or king turns tyrannical and wreaks havoc on his own people:

For certainly, I see that the philosophers and theologians agree in this matter, that the prince who has taken possession of a republic by force and arms and, moreover, with no right and no public consent of the citizens can be killed by anyone and be deprived of his life and dominion. Because he is a public enemy and oppresses his country with all evils, and because he truly and properly puts on the name and nature of a tyrant, he may be removed by any method and he may put off his power violently as he took possession of it (2004, 154-55)

Such a remark has a wide applicability when it comes to the determination of a condition that the protagonist manufactures in his own nation. The speech between Malcolm and Macduff already suggests an anti-utopian landscape thoroughly taxed with a sovereign who has ascended the throne by wrong means and tries to keep his position safe resorting to more unlawful activities. In the adaptation of the play that situates it not in Medieval Scotland but in a post-apocalyptic era with drastic climate changes and acute shortage of resources, we have Montana Shakespeare who performed the same in 2007 in the Parks. The play, as Marga Lincoln reports (2017, August 3), moves into a “climate-disaster world where resources are limited and power is vital for survival”. The adaptation is based on the clue that nature shows abnormal activities after the saintly king is slain and since nature’s equilibrium is essential for survival, it is human efforts that disturb the same and pave way for a veritable post-apocalyptic scenario.

This idea that nature is at odds with human endeavors (in the killing of the sovereign) assigns a subtle, *dystopian* ring to the whole play. This idea of the manipulation of nature by human intervention may also be seen in the film *Waterworld* (1995) wherein the entire planet in near future is shown to be covered with water due to the melting of the polar ice caps. The character “Deacon” who holds a loose group of people on a huge warship, controls whatever resources they have, a ‘kingdom’ of his own that is an offshoot of a once plentiful world full of unimaginable possibilities. The global warming that caused the ice-caps to melt covered geo-political landscapes to give rise to a blood-like, watery “waterworld” where Nature tests people brutally. The deacon, much like Macbeth, searches for the mythical “Dryland”, a land of possibilities. But like Macbeth, he and his previous clans have already murdered it—the result is a vast, watery world wherein, he is doomed to find a piece of land, much like Macbeth, who is equally doomed to find if he can his ‘Dryland’ of uninterrupted rule.

In the motion picture, in absence of civilization and the various utilities that it provides, humans have been reduced to the status of “drifters” who have taken to barter system. Only very few who have undergone mutation by growing functional “gills” can survive, as the protagonist who finds the way to the “Dryland”, the top of Mount Everest that harbors essential plant and animal life due to the increased greenhouse effect in the past. Many dystopian, post-apocalyptic films show this trend wherein human civilization has been rendered sterile due to the conscious intervention of humans who have paid scant regard to Mother Nature. Whether it is the killing of a sovereign or the forcible seizure of power, nature retaliates furiously in *Macbeth*. It is reported after the death of Duncan that the horses in the castle’s stables ate each other and the whole earth shook. While Shakespeare shows the effect and consequences of man’s sin through paranormal means, this abnormality is achieved through conscious human intervention. The play starts with a battle and the meeting of the witches in a presumably arid, infertile landscape that does not support much and there are evidences throughout the play that Scotland already labours and suffers from farmer suicides (as in the Porter scene) and harvest uncertainties. The seeming plenitude of the Banquet scene is in sharp contrast to the “blasted heath” where the witches meet Macbeth. The suicide of the English farmer who had hanged himself when the expectation of a bountiful harvest ran haywire attests to the dystopian leanings of the play. It sometimes seems that Macbeth is an inheritor of a post-apocalyptic landscape after the murder of Duncan who had been his guest in his castle that offered the bounties of Nature once, now gone.

What renders the play a uniquely ‘dystopian’ temper is this game of surveillance that crushes all within the relentless state machinery. Whether it is Lady Macbeth or the protagonist himself, all fall prey to this great game that renders Scotland a veritable ‘dystopia’ of sorts. This entails the pulverization of the human spirit and freedom to an appreciable extent that is the hallmark of many a dystopian state of affairs. Shakespeare had a ‘dystopian’ and dark vision of the unrelenting monarchical, state machinery in Tudor and Stuart regimes and the play rehearses some of the recurrent themes and ideas of topical relevance in Renaissance England in this play.

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End Notes

- 1 Throughout *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), the idea of being watched and that this watching may have nefarious consequences in the end reinforces the idea of surveillance in the play, a vital parameter of any dystopian work. It is this web of existential crisis that the two characters are trying to make sense of in the of the play.
- 2 Dystopias are marked by the suppression of information and often rely on a huge state apparatus who see to this—in Orwell’s *1984* (1949), no one has seen the Big Brother actually, and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) is more or less silent about what actual orgies are accomplished in hidden quarters, as revealed to the lady protagonist Offred by the Governor of that particular section of the Gileadean republic.
- 3 All the quoted passages from the play are from the edition of *Macbeth* ed. by Robert S. Miola, Loyola College, Maryland; W.W. Norton & Co.

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