

A POSTMODERN READING OF VERONICA ROTH'S "DIVERGENT TRILOGY": NEGOTIATING CONCERNS OF DYSTOPIA AND SEEKING EGALITARIANISM

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Abstract

Several contemporary authors of the Young Adult genre have garnered for themselves a cult following which makes their works bestsellers. The popularity of these works stems from their cognitive accessibility to the young adult audience. These works ensure that the protagonist and his / her friends pass through certain ordeals which must test them and in the process 'educate' them about the society surrounding them. The characters realize the problems in their society and undertake the rigorous task of re-constructing their societal order and structure. Under this broad rubric, my paper shall focus on the "Divergent Trilogy" by American author, Veronica Roth. America is arguably the manifestation of late capitalism and Roth goes on to show how she foresees the city of Chicago in the not so distant future. Roth's Chicago is a post-apocalyptic simulation. Metanarratives about societal roles and purpose segregate the society within the society. Knowledge is controlled by totalitarian organisations in possession of powerful weapons in the form of serums. It is up to the protagonist and her friends to look beyond the met narratives plaguing their social order. It is their deeds alone which can tilt their society from dystopian barbarism and atrocities towards egalitarianism and justice. My paper shall also attempt to show how a metanarrative of progress is necessary for change and although the postmodern man may be skeptical of it, Roth says that it is nevertheless imperative. I shall be taking the help of certain ideas we associate with postmodernism to justify my argument here and there, for instance, the concept of simulacrum by Baudrillard, the skepticism towards grand narratives by Lyotard, Foucault's ideas on power and knowledge. However perhaps the most integral theoretical framework shall be provided by Richard Rorty's arguments on globalisation, postmodern discursive strategies and progress in the contemporary times.

Keywords: Dystopia, Egalitarianism, Simulation, Metanarrative of progress, Power – Knowledge binary.

The “Divergent Trilogy” by Veronica Roth held the top three spots of the USA Today bestselling books list on 9th January 2014 (Deutsch). Its success places it alongside similar popular dystopian sagas like “The Hunger Games” and “The Maze Runner”. These works place the young-adult protagonist in a futuristic dystopian setting, and he / she experiences certain emotions like love, companionship, anger, sadness, and an essential urge to escape the dystopia.

The popularity of these novels perhaps stems from the futuristic setting, the familiar emotional upheavals of a teen and a comprehensible language which is relatively easy to follow. Structurally these works are similar for the plots of these novels are situated within the cusps of two wars. The first war is the result of present day crises which take severe complicated forms in the distant future. The second war however is the war of the people against the totalitarian system which suppress and control the peripheral population. The protagonist grows up in the oppressed system and goes through a series of events which educate him / her about the shortcomings of the present system of governance. Inevitably, it is the group of youths on the verge of becoming adults who play pivotal roles in restructuring their society. They rebel against totalitarian forces and work towards establishing a democratic, secular and egalitarian society.

Interestingly, all of the above mentioned series are set somewhere in the United States of America of the future and have been made into films. The dystopian setting asks the question why the contemporary authors are imagining the America of the future as a dystopian country. Francis Fukuyama in “The End of History?” sees the fall of the Soviet Union as the end of a totalitarian ideology and he hails liberal democratic form of government as the ideal form of governance and establishes liberal democracy as the final ideology in the narrative of progress (2). America then becomes the hub of late capitalism in a liberal democratic system. Jacques Derrida exposes the imperfections and inequalities prevalent in the existing liberal democratic form of governance in his work Specters of Marx (Sim 7). An exploitative practice like capitalism thriving under an unequal form of governance breeds disparities in living conditions and opportunities.

Fukuyama also claims that large scale wars are not necessary in the contemporary liberal democratic world as the liberal democratic system will not give rise to any social crisis(25). The portrayal of a large scale war which ushers the dystopian regime in the works of contemporary authors like Veronica Roth and others, challenges this narrative of Fukuyama. These authors are then perhaps aware of the grievances and dissatisfactions predominant in the contemporary liberal democratic society. In their vision, the existing discrepancies within the liberal democratic capitalistic machinery lead to a great war which ravages the land and creates a totalitarian form of control.

The Bureau is the embodiment of authoritarianism in the Roth's trilogy and its jurisdiction of Chicago reveals that the postmodern condition which began in the second half of the 20th century makes its presence felt in Roth's narrative in the form of a dystopia vision. Hence I have chosen the "Divergent Trilogy" as the primary text for this paper to explore the major tendencies of postmodern dystopia and to see whether these issues reach a resolution. Roth's artistic rendition of America as the big brother monitoring its residents, coupled with the growing social inequalities under capitalism, and existing framework of liberal democracy demands our attention.

Roth throws her protagonist Tris Prior in the middle of a chain of events which educate her about the multiplicity of history, the capitalistic machinery selling lies, distorting genetic coding and leading the society to a civil war where totalitarianism emerges victorious. She sees through the metanarrative of the Bureau, the centre of power. Tris's knowledge of postmodern discursive strategies guides her in the quest to restore equality in her society and escape the tyranny of the Bureau.

The Simulacrum that is Roth's Chicago

The residents of Chicago put their utmost faith in the 'faction system'. The thought of being faction less and away from the society is a troubling thought for the young Beatrice Prior. The residents are not entirely aware why they are not permitted to go beyond the wall of the city. Most of them have this idea that there is nothing but waste lands beyond the walls which reminds one about the wars fought before the faction system was formed and peace can only be maintained through the faction system as it provides everyone with a predestined social purpose.

Loyalty towards the faction system and almost severing familial ties after the choosing ceremony are devices of controlling and disciplining the new recruits of a faction. This ensures the continuity and proper functioning of the faction system. However as the video footage of Edith Prior is aired, the faction system is exposed as an artifice. The city of Chicago is in reality a fourth order simulacrum.

The city does not pertain to any reality whatsoever and it only breeds further simulacrum. Edith Prior speaks of the 'divergents' as the messianic figure who shall restore peace in the outer world, but Tris and her friends soon learn that it is a lie. The identity of Edith Prior is perhaps a second order simulacrum. She resets her memories and takes up a new identity and worldview to begin the experiment. It is ironic to realise that even though she records the video message before resetting her memories, she still lies about the grandness of the experiment. No one needed saving, it was just a narrative to legitimize the experiment on fellow human beings by depriving them of their social rights. The narratives of Edith Prior and the remaining founders of the city are what Baudrillard regards as the simulation of the fourth order.

Capitalistic modes of production encourage this play of simulations to increase the profit machinery. Similarly, the Bureau encourages the play of simulations because it convinces the government of the grandness of their experiment and adds significance to the victims of the experiments. They feel they are chosen for a grand destiny, they must not question the existing narratives guiding their fates. The simulations then justify the narratives of the Bureau and ensure its hegemonic position of power.

Genetic Defect as a Metanarrative

Lyotard is dubious about the master narrative which legitimizes scientific endeavors in the name of progress (37). Universal progress is the desired goal but rarely achieved. Edith Prior's narrative of achieving genetic purity justifies the Bureau's experiments and the slaughtering of factions in the name of progress.

Edith Prior claims to be a genetically damaged person and volunteers for the Chicago experiment. She speaks of wars fought by the genetically damaged and the necessity to achieve genetic purity. Her narrative becomes the seed for another mass murder in Chicago as the Allegiant (a group abiding by the narrative of Edith Prior and defends the faction system to continue the experiment) takes up arms against the functionless leaders.

The experiment is at a danger of discontinuation if the inhabiting members of Chicago learn the artificiality of their lives and ideas about the world. But the narrative of Edith Prior associates a grand cause with the experiment and safeguards the Bureau's interests. It is the existence of this video footage of Edith Prior that led to the war between 'Erudite' and 'Abnegation'. The abnegation chose to reveal it to the public and the Bureau understood that it may hinder the course of the experiment. They therefore provided Jeanine Matthews with the hallucination serum which allowed her to control the 'dauntless' and slaughter almost the entire faction of abnegation.

The Bureau was unmoved by the death of so many people, because they were essentially genetically damaged people. The Bureau strived for universal good through the experiment but fails to see that the universal good includes the genetically damaged people. The experiments did not ensure good living conditions for the 'GDs' in the city as well as outside its borders in the 'fringes'.

The Bureau members were so encouraged by their chosen master narrative that they plans to reset the memory of every Chicago dweller to restart the experiment. It would have stopped the war between the functionless and the allegiant. The prevention of war concerns the Bureau because if the war occurs their experiment may not produce the desired results due to a lack of population in the gene pool. The lives of GDs are not count as human lives by the Bureau. Hence the Bureau did not interfere during the slaughtering of the abnegation but they

are ready to intervene when their desired number of individuals from the gene pool is at a risk of extinction.

Roth's Dystopia: A Model Panopticon

Foucault reveals how prisons undergo gradual changes in its rehabilitating techniques and structures to benefit the powerful (Rainbow 234). Roth moulds this notion with dystopian uncertainty and reconstructs her version of Chicago. The city is essentially a highly sophisticated prison for the genetically damaged. Foucault observes in "The Carceral" that in 'Mettray', the 'delinquents' were grouped into families headed by usually an older delinquent. Foucault says that the hierarchy favoured the upholding of prevalent norms, and the older member already familiarized with the rules of the institution will teach those to the younger ones (Rainbow 234). Individuality is plucked out from these juveniles as they turn into a mass of unquestioning subjects (Rainbow 235) – such is the case in Roth's Chicago. The older genetically damaged individuals like Edith Prior chose to forget their memories and place themselves into the prison like city.

Foucault says the institutions like Mettray, taught the inhabitants workmanship, primary knowledge and agricultural techniques. Good performances were rewarded and good demeanour was encouraged, although they were under constant surveillance and never allowed to leave (Rainbow 236). This indeed reminds us of the farce that is the 'initiation ceremony'. The young adults are categorized into factions and are almost forced to spend the rest of their lives remaining loyal to that faction. They are not allowed to leave the faction compound alone without any justifiable reason. Their performances are subjected to rewards or punishments. The city of Chicago is separated from the external world by walls which are guarded by the 'dauntless' soldiers. No resident of the city was supposed to go beyond those walls.

The Bureau observes and controls the city dwellers through surveillance, serums and faction system respectively. Thus the city structurally and systematically resembles Foucault's 'panopticon' (Rainbow 19). The experiment is a double layered 'carceral' because apparently it aimed to produce law abiding citizens, categorized into factions and on the other hand, the Bureau observed and pulled the strings of its administration from outside. It aimed to produce genetically pure men from the masses of genetically damaged people.

Education and the Metanarrative of Social Hope

Tris's interaction with people from several sections of the society of her city and beyond educates her about the alternative narrative of history which challenges that of the Bureau. She realizes that there is no genetically pure and genetically damaged binary. Wars have been fought before the 'Purity war'. The Bureau marginalizes several people under the influence of a metanarrative of genetic purity. She manages to see how her city is detached from the external reality and recognizes its prison like structure.

However, she does not cease to act in this pessimistic dystopia. She follows Richard Rorty's pragmatic approaches to mend her society. She calls for a 'homogenization of difference' (Rorty237) and works with her companions from several sections of her society to rewrite the Bureau's version of history. Escaping the dystopian nihilism is not possible without hope and she chooses hope despite her surroundings. Social progress cannot be achieved without hope (231) and Tris realizes this like Rorty. She uses the postmodern discursive strategies to make sense of her world, defeat the 'over class' (233) and achieve equality in a movement towards utopia.

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