



The Dystopian Fixation : Roth's *Divergent* – a Reflection of the Post-Apocalyptic Trend in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction



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Abstract :

The last decade has witnessed a huge influx of the genre of the post-apocalyptic novel. The rise of the dystopian trend is especially dominant in contemporary young adult fiction. The massive recognition of trilogies such as The Hunger Games Series, the Divergent series, and the Maze Runner series - all of which are currently on the road to becoming hugely popular, not to mention profitable, Hollywood movie franchises – point towards the preoccupation of the adolescent as well as the adult with the question of what comes after, i.e., the imagined scenario of a future universe which bears the brunt of contemporary environmental degradation, authoritarian governance, excessive use of technology, and limitations in personal freedom and individuality.

This paper attempts to give a comprehensive exposition of the term 'dystopia', its origin, meaning and usage. It further examines the various ways in which dystopian or post-apocalyptic genre has been utilized, especially in popular fiction and mass culture. The

attempt of this study is to conduct an investigation of how dystopia is politicized in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. It examines the nightmarish scenario of a futuristic society under the iron control of a totalitarian regime, which, in turn, is a projection of the extreme tactics of control such as widespread surveillance being employed by so-called democratic governments in the real world. Roth's *Divergent* details the different facets of power employed by the authoritarian regime and the protagonist's rebellion against the system.

Keywords : dystopia, post-apocalyptic fiction, power politics, Young Adult fiction, agency

Research Paper :

Dystopia as represented in fiction is not a new phenomenon. Right from Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, there have been numerous works of dystopian fiction throughout English literary history. Books for young people set in post-apocalyptic or dystopian worlds are also not new. Three notable early examples are Madeleine L'Engle's science fantasy *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), William Sleator's suspense novel *House of Stairs* (1974) and the politically intriguing *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry.

However, in recent years, there has evolved a trend of the representation of post-apocalyptic scenario, especially in young adult (YA) fiction. Starting from Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series, there has been a constant influx of narratives set in the near or distant future, where the people are often governed by a totalitarian government. In these novels, it is often the protagonist who takes it upon herself to liberate the citizens from the yoke of the authoritarian regime, frequently at personal risk. These dystopian works essentially reflect different dimensions of power play and the ultimate success of the dominant power structure as theorized by philosophers such as Michel Foucault. The works represent a Boudrillardian superreality or hyperreality which may be regarded as a hyperbolic representation of the present-day world.

Since the publication of both *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*, a new trend dominates American YA publishing: the dystopian novel. YA dystopian literature places the reader within the context of a futuristic, post-apocalyptic version of the United States. Kay Sambell offers two necessary elements of dystopian literature: first, it serves as a warning against "current human behaviours" and second, it must present a hopeful solution to those behaviors (163).

The contemporary YA fiction resonates with the teenagers in a unique way. It acts as an initiator into the dark underbelly of the adult world. On their journey to self-discovery, they are identifying with a new crop of young protagonists, often in post-apocalyptic worlds, crusading against oppression. Part of the reason is that "...they [the teenagers] too are

beginning to question the authority of their parents, become skeptical of our political system, and challenge the traditional power structures like school and law” (Sztabnik). Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*, the first installment of her trilogy of novels of the same name, is one such instance of post-apocalyptic YA fiction.

The American short story writer and novelist Veronica Roth was born in New York but was raised primarily in Illinois. She graduated with a degree in creative writing from the Northwestern University, Illinois. *Divergent* was her debut novel, written during winter break of her senior year at Northwestern and published in 2011. *Divergent* is the first book in the acclaimed *Divergent* series, followed by sequels *Insurgent* (2012) and *Allegiant* (2013).

Divergent is set in post-apocalyptic Chicago, where society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue – Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent).

On an appointed day of every year, all sixteen-year-olds must select the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. Beatrice Prior (“Tris”), the heroine, is Abnegation born, but finds out that she is divergent. Since Divergents can think independently and the government cannot control their thinking, they are considered threats to the social order. The rest of the narrative is about how Tris attempts to survive in the totalitarian regime.

Dystopia is described as an unfavorable society in which to live, coming from the Ancient Greek roots *dys-* and *-topia*, which mean "bad" and "place to live" respectively. Dystopia is the antithesis of Utopia. In a dystopian story, society itself is typically the antagonist; it is society that is actively working against the protagonist’s aims and desires. This oppression frequently is enacted by a totalitarian or authoritarian government, resulting in the loss of civil liberties and untenable living conditions, caused by any number of circumstances, such as world overpopulation, laws controlling a person’s sexual or reproductive freedom, and living under constant surveillance. Dystopian fiction belongs to the genre of Speculative Fiction, and could encompass a number of subgenres depending on the elements of the story. The novel is set in a place governed by totalitarian dictatorships, bureaucracies or corporations. The setting is bleak and dark with the citizens of the post-apocalyptic world living under a depressing cloud of suffering, death, terror and pessimism.

The heroines or heroes are of different types in various dystopian novels. One is the protagonist who intuitively feels something is wrong with society and sets out to change it, believing that it is possible to overthrow the dictatorship, or merely escape from the misery. Often the protagonist's opinion varies significantly from those around him, leading to clashes, as her/his co-habitants are frequently not aware that they are living in chains. This factor

reflects the contemporary situation in the real world where people are oblivious to the fact that they live under a rule which follows the surveillance system where the “Big Brother” is constantly watching them.

Another common form of protagonist is the high-standing, accepted hero, who is part of the Utopian perception of the dystopia, but eventually discovers or comes to understand how wrong society has become and either attempts to change it or destroy it.

In other dystopian works of fiction, the author concentrates on environmental issues by presenting a world which has experienced a complete environmental breakdown and wherein the characters struggle daily for the very things one takes for granted in real life, such as oxygen, as is represented in *Elusion* (2014) by Claudia Gabel and Cheryl Klam.

Divergent is set in a post-apocalyptic version of Chicago, many years into the future. The novel’s version of Chicago has changed considerably from the city one is familiar with now. The highways are crumbling, the bridges have collapsed, and many of the once-mighty skyscrapers have been reduced to skeletons. Even the Lake Michigan, the landmark of Chicago, has dried up and has been reduced to a marsh. This location is in keeping with the post-apocalyptic trend where the setting is futuristic. This helps explain the different structure of society, and justify the power of the totalitarian government.

Similar to Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* with its divisions into districts, in the *Divergent* universe, the inhabitants are divided into factions. Societal grouping extends into most YA dystopian literature, having roots in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, Carrie Hughes’s *The Dream Catcher*, and Zilpha Snyder’s Green-sky trilogy (Hintz, “Joy” 108). In *Divergent*, every seventeen year old must choose one of five factions: Abnegation, Candor, Erudite, Amity, or Dauntless. Each faction provides a unique service to Chicago’s whole structure.

The state of YA literature in the 21st century is of a genre that has spun wildly into the future and that YA future is a bleak one for the human race. According to Antero Garcia, dystopian YA fiction such as the *Divergent* series feature familiar tropes. This genre envisages a post-catastrophic world in which some sort of unnamed devastation has radically restructured the norms and codes of society. Children in these works are “forced to violently kill in order to adhere to the expectations of adults that perhaps abuse power”; they are “forced into limiting constraints of identity and labour associated with their identity”, and “are in a classed society that further stratifies the wealthy and working class” (Garcia 71).

As regards the climax, in dystopian literature, the story is often unresolved. Often the dystopia is not brought down. The protagonists may make their individual stand and often fail, but give hope to others in the dystopia. Sometimes this climax is the protagonist’s escape

from the dystopia. In other scenarios, the protagonist fails to achieve anything and the dystopia continues as before.

Another type of dystopian fiction is the representation of a post-apocalyptic feminist dystopia, where women have no rights whatsoever. The novel is set in a place ruled by misogynist laws, where the future of the voiceless “gendered subaltern” is decided by the totalitarian government, as in *Matched* (2010) by Allyson Braithwaite Condie.

Divergent, though it does not depict a feminist utopia/dystopia, concentrates on its female protagonist, Beatrice, and her resistance to the contemporary social order in her world. In fact, as Day et al put it, “...the desire to resist the limitations of gender and age can be found in many contemporary girl protagonists, particularly in the dystopian novels that are commanding so much attention in the world of young adult literature...” (3). The female protagonists of contemporary YA dystopias occupy liminal spaces as they seek to understand their places in the world in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free. The seemingly fearless Tris of *Divergent* both recognizes her liminal situation and, over time, uses her position as a means for resistance and rebellion against the social orders that seek to control them. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz argue in their book *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* that “as young people stand up and fight the system, they also learn their own limitations” (7).

Hintz and Ostry, in the introduction to their book *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, contend that “children [and young adults] learn about social organization” through dystopian writing (7). In the instance of Tris, she learns that reaching adulthood is wholly dependent on her ability to conform to her society’s mandates, which govern virtually every aspect of her life. If she lived in a society which encouraged young people to embrace their individuality and grow into independent beings, Tris likely would not feel compelled to rebel. It is because her government is so controlling that they are able to recognize the faults and weaknesses of post-apocalyptic Chicago and eventually, to rebel against them. The female protagonist becomes a subject, at least in part, because she is oppressed by the dystopian regime.

Tris, the protagonist of Veronica Roth’s debut novel, struggles to claim her own agency. She has grown up in a world that is ordered and safe. Born Beatrice Prior, Tris lives in a society that provides for its citizens, who are neatly divided into the five factions of Amity, Erudite, Dauntless, Candor, and Abnegation, in which Tris has been raised. Abnegation values a selfless life. At the outset of the novel, Tris gives a description of the rules of her faction:

“Our faction allows me [Tris] to stand in front of it [a mirror] on the second day of every third month, the day my mother cuts my hair”.

Roth has created a dystopian world in which gendered stereotypes seemingly matter little. Tris is a far cry from the typical teenage girl. Her birth faction of Abnegation discourages vanity and frivolity. As a result, Tris has been conditioned to believe her physical appearance, something with which most teenage girls are preoccupied, is of little importance. She mentions that she looks at her reflection in the mirror “not for the sake of vanity, but out of curiosity” (Roth 1). According to her, the “gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanor of my [Tris’s] faction are supposed to make it easier for me to forget myself, and easier for everyone else to forget me too” (6).

Most YA dystopian fictions contain elements of conformity, or extreme equality. The inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic world are forced to be very similar and to conform to the rules and expectations that the government has set forth. Accordingly, the inhabitants of the *Divergent* universe are forced to adhere to the customs of their respective factions. “Faction customs dictate even idle behaviour and supersede individual preference”, as Tris comments (9). Faction comes before blood in the world created by Roth.

In the *Divergent* universe, children remain with their parents, completely immersed in their birth factions until the age of sixteen. Then, boys and girls undergo an “aptitude test”, which reveals “which of the five factions” they are best suited. Following the test, the teens participate in a “Choosing Ceremony”, during which they decide to remain with their birth factions or transfer to a different one (2). This rite of passage offers individuals a false sense that they are independent beings, as they seemingly are able to choose their own futures. In actuality, however, the limited freedom the Choosing Ceremony seemingly offers is an illusion, as is the stability the faction system appears to ensure.

During her aptitude test, Tris learns that she is Divergent; that is, she displays an equal aptitude for three factions: Abnegation, Erudite, and Dauntless. Tris is told Divergence is an “extremely dangerous” condition, and that she “should never share” the results of her test with anyone (23). “The potential threat to her safety concerns Tris less than the uncertainty about her identity, which she expected the test to end” (Basu 24). The aptitude test was meant to reveal who Tris was and where she belonged. In revealing her Divergence, the aptitude test forces Tris to know herself and her desires in order to choose the faction to which she believes she belongs. The act of choosing is significant primarily because it leads Tris to commit the first significant act of rebellion of the novel: she rebels against her natal faction of Abnegation and joins Dauntless. Her choice also forces her to demonstrate some level of self-

awareness as she leaves Abnegation because she believes “I am not selfless enough” (Roth 43).

Tris becomes the typical YA protagonist when she decides to save the Dauntless and Abnegation factions from the machinations of the Erudite. On the Initiation day of the Dauntless faction, Tris goes through her final assessment, a simulation containing each one of her fears that she must conquer, one after another. She is extremely successful and ranks first, becoming an official member of Dauntless. However, she later realizes that in the excitement of the day, the Dauntless leaders injected everyone with a simulation serum that day, calling it a tracking device. She knows they must be lying, and that Erudite will use this serum as a simulation to get Dauntless to fight Abnegation for them.

Finally, she manages to free the Dauntless from mind control. The novel ends by shattering the two factions Tris has close ties with, Dauntless and Abnegation, leaving their erstwhile members basically factionless. Tris has no alternative at this point but to embrace her Divergence, concluding that with “no home, no path, no certainty”, she is “no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris, the brave” (487). Ultimately, the rebellious acts Tris commits lead her to transform from a girl on fire to a young woman in charge of her own future.

The allure of fiction has always had roots in escapism. Dystopian fiction such as *Divergent* helps the reader to escape to a fictional society darker than that which exists in reality, which is refreshingly different from one of rosy idealism. Post-apocalyptic YA novels such as Roth’s work also have a cathartic effect on the readers – the dull landscape of futuristic Chicago would make one appreciate the society one lives in, even if it is a flawed one.

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