

Navigating Humanity's Fate: A Dual Exploration of Peril and Progress in “*The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*” and “*The Tomorrowland*”

Shreya Jayachandran

Assistant Professor/English Literature, Department of English
Amrita University, College of Arts & Science, Kochi, India
Email – shreyamsj3@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper conducts a comparative study focusing mainly on the utopian and dystopian elements of two prominent films “The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials” and “The Tomorrowland”. It also deals with the similarities and differences in both the films based on their themes and visuals. Going into a broader discourse of film studies and dystopian literature, this paper aims to elucidate the filmmaker's distinct visions of the future and how humanity itself can lead the world to its doom or toward its triumphant upliftment. It also explores the themes, the narratives, and the visuals of each work. Two of the major ideas that will be focused on in this paper are how “The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials” shows us the struggle for survival in a harsh, post-apocalyptic landscape and how “The Tomorrowland” shows us an optimistic future fueled by creativity and human potential.*

Key Words: *Dystopia, Utopia, Thomas More, Totalitarianism, optimism.*

1. INTRODUCTION: -

In the realm of cinema, narratives often reflect the collective anxiety, hope, and aspirations of a society. Here the two films “The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials” and “The Tomorrowland” stand out as compelling explorations of humanity's fate. Each of them presents two distinct visions of the future, when one shows the peril of the world the other shows progress. This offers the audiences a dual exploration of the human condition amidst all the challenges and possibilities of an uncertain world. The young adult dystopian novel “The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials” shows the audience a dystopian landscape where a group of young survivors' wrestle with the aftermath of a catastrophic occurrence. In “Tomorrowland” we can see how people are trying to bring up a utopian society through their imagination and innovations.

Thomas More in his work “Utopia” which was published in 1516, defines utopia as an imaginable, hypothetical place that is perfect in all senses, whether it is geographically, politically, socially, culturally, or even technologically. Utopia and Dystopia represent the opposites in literature and society. When one shows us an unimaginably perfect society, the latter shows us a destroyed one. Both dystopia and utopia are considered as an imaginable world but at any moment this imaginary world can be turned into reality. A few of the major elements that can be seen in a dystopian society are totalitarianism or an oppressive government, limited individual freedom, environmental degradation, war, socioeconomic inequality, surveillance, propaganda, censorship, and a sense of hopelessness and despair. All these can be considered as a few of the many reasons for a dystopian society.

Now for a society to become a utopia there should be freedom in all senses like the freedom of speech, expression, etc., technological advancement, environmental sustainability, and a sense of collective well-being and fulfillment. Utopia is an imaginable world because a perfect world like this can never be created but if we investigate our present society, it is slowly changing into a dystopian world. With the advancement in technology, we are always under surveillance, the

moment one thinks about something the information related to it can be seen in their mobile phones. Environmental degradation is another issue as lands are taken over by factories and other buildings. The increased control over the environment has led to famines and other disasters, even an increase in different kinds of diseases. Totalitarianism is a system in which the power goes into a single hand. A centralized authority where that party has complete control over the masses. All the decisions will be taken by that single party, and this takes away the freedom of speech or expression from the people.

The Nazi Germany regime under Adolf Hitler, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, and North Korea under the Kim Dynasty are a few examples of totalitarian regimes. So, these dystopian situations are well portrayed in modern dystopian literary works such as, “The Hunger Games” by Suzanne Collins, “The Divergent Series” by Veronica Roth, “The Brave New World” by Aldous Huxley, “The Maze Runner” by James Dashner, etc. On December 26th 2010 The New York Times published an article titled “The Dark Side of Young Adult Fiction” and this article raised the question of “why do the bestselling young adult novels seem darker in theme now than in the past years?”, many more such questions were raised. Many authors shared their thoughts about the same for example, Pablo Bacigalupi, the author of “Ship Breaker” (2010) said, “I suspect that young adults crave stories of broken futures because they are uneasily aware that their world is falling apart”. Another answer given by the author of “Frindle”, Andrew Clements said “Perhaps the dystopian stories of today are darker because all of us, writers and readers alike, have become more aware of the many awful things that happen in our world. A study of world history shows that truly awful things have always happened”.

Dystopia, this word comes from the Greek prefix “dys” which means bad or harsh, and the Greek root “topos” which means place. If we look into any of the dystopian works, the major idea behind the story would be a single harmful idea or system and the protagonist is the only person who can see the flaws of society. As mentioned earlier Utopia was coined by Thomas More for his 1516 book “Utopia” which talks about a fictional island in the Atlantic Ocean. “ou” means no or not and “eu” means good, so Utopia means “a good place” or “no place”. So, this paper will be looking into a comparative study of both films by looking into their themes, characters, and narratives. But most importantly the elements that make a film dystopian or utopian.

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS :

The Maze Runner: Scorch Trials is a 2015 American dystopian science fiction film that is an adaptation of James Dashner’s 2010 novel “The Scorch Trials”. It is also the second novel in the “Maze Runner” series. The film was a prequel to the 2014 film “The Maze Runner” and was directed by Wes Ball and the screenplay was done by T.S. Nowlin. So, if we look into a small summary of the film, it is about the adventurous journey of a group of teenagers, who fight against the corrupt government and are trying to save the world from its fall. The cinematography of the film makes it feel so real to the audience. It makes the audience feel and understand what a dystopian world is all about and how a world can change drastically due to the advancements in many of the fields.

So, we have our protagonist Thomas, played by Dylan O’Brien, and his fellow Gladers. Gladers are a group of young survivors who live in the Glade, also known as an enclosed area which is surrounded by a maze. The whole glade is a part of an experiment wherein the Gladers are sent into this maze, with no memory of their past. So, they must work together in a group to escape the maze and through their journey, they uncover the truth behind the corrupt government. After they escape from the maze which can be seen in the first season of “The Maze Runner”, they are taken over by a mysterious group called WCKD (pronounced as wicked). Thomas and other Gladers are taken by Mr. Janson, who is secretly working with Ava Paige, the leader of WCKD. Later, Thomas finds that many more young teenagers were being used for this experiment. WCKD is trying to find a cure for the flare virus, which affects the brain and turns people into ‘cranks’ (zombies). For this, they conduct experiments on the individuals who are immune to the virus, they are the Gladers. To make them immune to this disease they perform various experimental treatments and procedures which could lead to their death.

So, the experiments conducted by WCKD are dangerous, also their methods are against the ethical dilemmas as they are putting an individual’s life into danger. Organizations’ willingness to sacrifice human life in the name of scientific development raises questions about the morality of their actions as well as the value of human life.

Now let’s look into the features that make this a dystopian film. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic world, a place that is destroyed, and people are forced to run away from their homeland to survive. There is no sign of human existence. A sense of dissolution and destruction of the world can be seen in the film, for example, Thomas says “We were promised

sanctuary, instead we found this.” Scorch, the place, is the setting and we can see in the film that the place is portrayed as fully destroyed and there is no sign of human life or vegetation.

We can also see the cranks who were once humans but later on, they were turned into zombies because of the experiments. Another feature is totalitarian control, WCKD uses the young Gladers as puppets to fulfill their needs by not giving importance to their lives. This feature can be seen in a conversation with Janson, who is the representative of WCKD, and he tells Thomas, “We are on the same side here, Thomas. We both want a cure.” By hearing this Thomas rebukes him by asking, “Is that what you call it? Locking kids in cages, torturing them for the sake of a cure?”. We can also see how Thomas is trying to fight against the organization to save him as well as his fellow Gladers from the atrocities of the organization. Another feature that can be looked into is survival and betrayal, they must fight against the cranks to survive in the scorch. They must make sure that they do not get infected by the infected cranks. So, the Gladers should somehow survive the hostile environment. Also, we can see the rise in trust issues among the Gladers. This makes it even worse for them to survive the scorch as there should be teamwork and trust between them to survive any condition. One of the major characters that can be used to show this feature is Aris Jones, he was a young survivor just like any other Glader. Initially, he becomes an ally with Thomas and the other Gladers, but later WCKD manipulates him which makes him break his trust. This betrayal raises the problems faced by the Gladers also there is an increase in trust issues between the teenagers as they fall into a trap set by WCKD.

Throughout the film, we can see an increase in tensions and disagreements between the characters as they are at times forced to sacrifice their autonomy and principles that they had followed in their life. WCKD is trying to manipulate them by making them make difficult decisions to survive which can also lead to the death of one or more Gladers. They are ready to go to any extent to survive the scorch, which shows us the hopeless state of the Gladers. This can be seen in a conversation between Thomas and Teressa, Teressa tells that, “We have to do what they say if we want to survive.”, Thomas’s reply shows us his desperation to survive the scorch, alive. “I’m not sure I want to survive if it means being their puppet.” The Scorch shows us the harsh realities of the world.

The place is shown as one which is destroyed, and human habitation is very difficult. The characters are oppressed by the organization and are forced to do things that are against their ethics and principles. These are a few of the major features that make this film dystopian fiction.

The movie “The Tomorrowland” has certain features that are just opposite to that of the above-mentioned film. Being a utopian film, it beautifully portrays a world that is dominated by technological advancement but even then, it has its dystopian elements in it. Like for example Governor Nix, the one who is ruling over Tomorrowland, a place where we can see his authoritarian control over the place and the people staying there. Tomorrowland can be seen as a place that has boundless imagination, and technological innovation, showing us the humanities future, embarked with optimism, progress, and creativity.

So, this is science fiction that shows a utopian future. Tomorrowland can be seen as a place with technological advancement, innovative ideas, cultural diversity, the spirit of exploration, and a place where people think optimistically, encouraging people to think high and trying to make a better tomorrow where people can live peacefully. “Perfection is an illusion”, and so this place has its flaws like authoritative control over the people, environmental degradation, technological dystopia, etc. Another element that is highly seen is the protagonist’s (Casey) optimism. At the start of the film, there is a conversation between Casey and her father wherein she asks her father, “There are two wolves that are always fighting. One is darkness and despair the other is light and hope. The question is which wolf wins?”. Even though the film does not mention an answer, this shows us the optimism that one should have in one's life. This quote shows us one’s struggle between darkness and despair and light and hope. It emphasizes the importance of one’s choice and perspectives that will help them to navigate their life to perish or peril.

Tomorrowland or Project T also known as A World Beyond is a 2015 science fictional film which was directed by Brad Bird. The story is about an optimistic young girl Casey Newton, and she gets a mysterious pin and by touching on it she sees the “Tomorrowland” or a futuristic utopian world. Together with Frank Walker, a genius inventor, and Athena, an audio-animatronic robot, Casey starts her journey to find Tomorrowland. The film’s visuals are enough to understand why it is called a utopian science fiction, the advanced technology can be seen in the film as there are flying vehicles in the film, innovative infrastructures like skyscrapers, floating buildings, etc. Intellectual and creative freedom can be seen in film as the inventors, artists and other professionals have the freedom to give life to their innovative ideas. People

have an optimistic outlook towards their life and future. Many dialogues in the film bring out ideas of optimism, the importance of imagination, and hope for a better future. "Let's imagine for a moment what the world would look like in 50 years. The future is scary. But is it just a slide into a slow decline, or is there some sort of leap we can make?". Through this Governor Nix wants the audience to understand that there is a possibility of change and if they believe in themselves and in their dreams, they can change the world into a better one.

3. CONCLUSION:

This paper deals with a comparative study of two films, mainly looking into their dystopian and utopian aspects. Now if we look closely there are also a few similarities between both the films. Both films come under the genre of science fiction. "The Tomorrowland" which is considered a utopian film has its dystopian elements in it and the same goes for "The Maze Runner: Scorch Trials".

If we look into both the films closely then we can understand that a dystopian or a utopian world is created by humans themselves. In The Maze Runner Ava Paige the chancellor of WCKD, the organization, is at first shown as a woman who is authoritative and mysterious at the same time. But later on, we can see her true intentions behind her actions. She intended to make a cure that can save people from the deadly flare virus but the method that she chose to fulfill her needs was against the ethics. She started to do her experiments on the Gladers by putting them in captivity.

Whereas in Tomorrowland, an optimistic young girl Casey wanted a future where people are free from all kinds of problems and disasters. For this, she tried to create a Tomorrowland with the help of her creative thoughts and imagination. The world can be changed into a good or a bad one but the one who makes it in such a way is the humans themselves.

So, the world could be lead to its peril or progress by our actions. Just like the story of the wolves, the result is based on which path we take to reach our goal. "You wanna know how to make the world a better place? Tell your story" (said by Frank Walker, "Tomorrowland"). Both the films show us the power of storytelling, how it can affect people's mindset. But the effect can be in a good or in a bad way, what matters is how people take it.

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