

Censorship and Dystopia: An analysis of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451

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Abstract

'Dystopia' is a word which stands as an opposite of 'utopia'. Nothing is in order in a dystopian land and very little liberty and rights are enjoyed by humans with the government powerful enough to delve deep into all the aspects of a person's life. While many writers have written dystopian novels, few match the brilliance and quality of the American writer Ray Bradbury's novel, **Fahrenheit 451** [1953]. Set in a world where the ban on books allows the authorities to hire firemen to destroy them, the central character slowly goes on to realize what gets destroyed along with books in a society. The novel has often been seen as commentary on censorship of materials and a recollection in prose of several things the writer himself saw. The present paper will try to discuss how a dystopian rule is made more powerful through the use of censorship and will bring in elements from Bradbury's magnum opus for the purpose. It will talk about several incidents of WWII which did help in the development of the novel and finally will try to bring in all the mentioned things together to validate the fact that censorship does harm human consciousness and understanding.

Keywords: Dystopia, Censorship, **Fahrenheit 451**, Ray Bradbury, Government, Literature.

"Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings"

- Heinrich Heine

Censorship has been, throughout the ages, a very significant feature of governments. While its worst avatar is visible exclusively in dictatorships, even democratic governments have decided from time to time to ban certain literary or cinematic materials. Anything which appears to threaten the proper functioning of a rule based on propaganda is sought to be erased by the nation's rulers. We get to hear every day about how some country has banned a particular book or has banned the showing of a particular movie or television show. There are many reasons for censorship of materials. Some of them include hurting religious sentiments, mockery of the government, indecency and depictions considered inaccurate. However, what the particular paper will try to deal with is an extreme idea of governance which exists only in fiction and which seeks to teach the common man the dangers related to the power of our leaders. It will talk about the dystopian literature and talk about the worst form of censorship called 'book burning'. For

both the above mentioned efforts, the text that has been selected here is great story, **Fahrenheit 451** written by the American author Ray Bradbury.

The human attribute of language has been further perfected by its feature of writing which enables humans to preserve their ideas for posterity. This vast body of written accounts, which can either be true accounts or stories, fall under the great category of literature. This ‘literature’ helps the people to feel and understand the lives of those who have died long ago. Our knowledge of ancient civilizations, wars and geniuses is completely dependent upon books and manuscripts. Even when one reads contemporary accounts, one gets to learn of the places and people thousands of miles away. The destruction of literature in the form of books and manuscripts hence may symbolize the stopping of ideas and understandings from engulfing the world. It is a conspicuous attempt on the part of the authorities to shut up the messages of great writers. In the present discussion, an attempt has been endeavored to talk about this destruction of literature by fire, which is labeled as ‘book burning’ and which has been carried out throughout the ages in many countries.

‘Book burning’, in its simplest sense, is the ritualistic destruction of books, manuscripts and other written materials which is carried out in a festive, celebratory manner. While printed copies of publications can be easily reproduced, several instances of book burning, which has happened throughout the ages, were aimed at the destruction of libraries of records and handwritten materials, the destruction of which was ultimate. A very well known recent case of book burning is the case of the infamous novel, **The Satanic Verses** [1988]. Many of its copies were seized and destroyed by devout Muslims, who considered it blasphemous.

Despite the fact that destruction of writings has never been the exclusive feature of just one nation or culture, there are several instances of this deed which have left their mark upon society and culture more than others. The most notable among them is the case of the Nazi book burnings which took place in Germany and other German occupied territories during the reign of the Third Reich. The foundation of Nazism was based upon certain ideas given shape by Adolf Hitler. They believed in the existence of a fair skinned, blue-eyed and blonde haired race of humans, which enjoyed both physical and intellectual superiority over all of the other humans on earth. They used to call this race of Europeans the ‘Aryan Race’. However, the main reason because of which the Nazis came to be condemned by humanity is their homicidal hatred towards Jews. Millions of the particular community were tortured and exterminated in the notorious concentration camps which were established all over Europe. The Nazi desire for world domination led to the destruction of many nations and cultures all over Europe. The combined effort of the Allied forces finally was able to defeat and destroy the Nazis and their ideologies and release Germany and the rest of Europe from its shackles. But the destruction the twelve years of Hitler brought upon mankind cannot be forgotten.

Nazi book burnings were carried out by groups of German students as a campaign against materials opposed to Nazism. Most of the burnings took place in Germany and German occupied Austria. The books most commonly destroyed were those written in German. The writings of Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and Bertolt Brecht were destroyed by fire as these great luminaries tended to speak in favor of those ideas which threatened the very foundations of

Nazism. Non-German language writings were also destroyed including the works of Englishmen like D. H. Lawrence and H. G. Wells, Russians like Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Americans like Jack London and Upton Sinclair. This mass activity led to the absence of any non-Nazi writings in Germany and the people were only exposed to the German propaganda. The actions of these few men and women had shocked the world to such a degree that even today people shiver when they read or retrospect about them.

The end of the Second World War brought two superpowers into existence, the USA and the USSR. After being subjected to innumerable atrocities by the Allied soldiers, mainly Russian soldiers, the people of Germany saw their beloved country ripped into two parts. Similar fates were met by the people of Italy and Japan. But for the victors, the post war era brought in various hopes of development and prosperity. But some young men were there who saw what was really taking place. The twentieth century was rocked by two great wars, which caused destruction, death and loss of human property on a scale never before measured. Even in the post WWII era, the world had not become a happy place for the people on earth. The US soldiers had no peace at all. From the streets of Europe, they now had to deal with the hostile jungles of Vietnam. The world was living in fear of the prospect of another global conflict, which now would be disastrous enough to erase mankind from the face of the earth. Despite the fact that Nazism and Fascism were apparently absent in the post war era, people knew that it would only take several zealous men to bring these two ogres back to civilization. The book burnings done by the Nazis did shock many men. Perhaps, one young American was the most shocked of them all. He was able to give shape to his fears in his magnum opus. He is the American writer Ray Bradbury, and his work that has to be talked here about is **Fahrenheit 451**.

Ray Douglas Bradbury [1920-2012] is one of the most well known writers of the literature of science fiction, horror and mystery. His artistic merit and creativity turned him into one of the most well known American horror writers, being next only to masters like Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce. He published a number of novels and short story collections during his lifetime. Among them is the 1953 dystopian novel, **Fahrenheit 451**.

A 'dystopia' is a place or country which exists in theory only. But it has been used in literary works on a massive scale. It can be described as a place where the life of citizens is undesirable and scary. The authorities are depicted as having immense, unrealistic power which burrows deep into the private lives of individuals also. The word is the opposite of another theoretical term 'utopia', which was coined by the Renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More in his eponymous work, **Utopia** [1516]. Taking this into consideration, we can see that in a 'utopia' everything is in order while in a dystopia, chaos prevails. There have been many works of dystopian fiction, some of which are **We** [1924] by Yevgeny Zamyatin, **Brave New World** [1932] by Aldous Huxley and the remarkable **1984** [1949] by George Orwell [Eric Arthur Blair]. All of these dealt with a future where the government holds absolute authority not only over the people, but over their mind and body as well. Bradbury's novel **Fahrenheit 451** follows the examples of these great works but in a quite different manner.

Published in 1953, when the world was slowly trying to rise from and rebuild the destruction caused by the Second World War, **Fahrenheit 451** deals with several incidents which take place

in a dystopian future where the possession, circulation, promotion and reading of books and other printed materials is prohibited. Those who own books generally get their books as well as their homes destroyed by firemen. The name of the novel is named after the supposed temperature at which Bradbury believed paper starts to burn. The story, divided into three parts, deals with the life and experiences of a book incinerating 'fireman' named Guy Montag who at first is thrilled with the duties he is serving but slowly begins to question the effects and morality of his deeds. He slowly starts to feel the need the society has of books and ultimately decides to join a group of men who advocate for the preservation and circulation of books. His wife's indifference to all that is happening in the world coupled with his discovery of books, his gradually increasing belief that the governments' power and authority over individuals could rise if they know nothing and finally, his realization of the value of books ultimately lead to this change of character.

Bradbury's novel is indeed a dystopian work for it describes a futuristic society which resembles an impossible society. It can be seen as written in the vein of other works like Zamyatin's **We**, where the individuals are identified numerically and are forced to live in transparent, glass houses. Bradbury, on the other hand focuses on books, which are more or less the cornerstones of human culture. The world where Bradbury's work takes place is a world where it is illegal to read and understand. It thus results in the impossibility of imagination. Ray Bradbury's condemnation of censorship is evident from his depiction of government funded incineration of literature in his novel.

Ray Bradbury's novel is not set during the war years. It is set in an unspecified time in his native land. What he describes is not the reality but man's worst fears. The fears of man are solely responsible for giving rise to dystopian fiction. When we talk about other dystopian works like **1984**, where a giant unified territory comprising of all the land of earth and the presence of an authoritarian entity called 'Big Brother' destroying even personal privacy of citizens is described, we get a glimpse of how Bradbury decided to deal with the similar topic of authoritarianism through the use of a different device. Unlike Zamyatin and Orwell, who believed in governments' brutal force over life and property is necessary in order to create a 'dystopia', Bradbury believed the governments' banning and burning of books will automatically turn passionate, questioning humans into docile, contented creatures. When you don't read, you cannot know anything. One would have to believe whatever he or she is taught by the authorities. The real actions and agendas of bureaucracy will not be understood and protested or encouraged in such a world, as writings and literature which serve as fundamental units of national awareness are absent.

Censorship and dystopia are more or less related as the government only bans those elements which stand as opponents to its rule. Anything which tends to change is made illegal as we all can see from our experiences. We can bring in elements of another work by George Orwell here, which is **Animal farm** [1945]. Set in a farm inhabited by anthropomorphic animals which overthrow human oppression to welcome animal rule, the 'fairy tale' like story deals with the corruption and ill use of authority which starts to blossom in that farm resulting from its need for intelligent rulers. The intelligent pigs [particularly Napoleon] try to make the farm animals believe that everything is good when they are gradually advancing towards doom. The pigs in

power tamper with the commandments which were important elements of the society and the revolution of the farm. They finally try to put forth the idea that true equality does not exist by trying to tamper with last commandment which talks about equality. Despite being a fairy tale, the book was written as a response to the revolution in Russia and today it serves to teach man of the dangers related to the acceptance of the teachings of the leaders. Napoleon attempted to remove all the materials that might expose him and his despotism in order to make his rule intact. The book surely teaches us how we can survive in a world where corrupt governments prey upon innocent civilians. Ray Bradbury's novel was written much after Orwell's and hence it would not be wrong to say that he was influenced by it.

The value of books is decreasing day by day in a world of technology and false beliefs. The people visiting libraries may be much lesser today than about fifty years ago. Books are slowly losing their value. But the destruction of literature which the Nazis carried out and its horrifying form which Bradbury depicted must never be made to become a reality. The people do have the power to make literature great again and they should do it in order to save the society from turning into a real life 'dystopia'.

In the conclusion, it would be right to say that censorship of anything is not right. All the books, movies, television shows, video games etc. which have been banned by countries do possess some importance and messages in themselves, the banning of which shuts them up completely. If some work tries to point out the corruption in a particular country, it is invaluable to its citizens. The government bans that book and stops the people from knowing. A dystopia is thus created. Hence, we can say that censorship and dystopia are truly interrelated elements and Ray Douglas Bradbury was one of the first men to realize this.

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