

Reimagining the Ideal Future: A Comparative Study of Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* and Project Itoh's *Harmony*

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Abstract

In order to reflect on the contemporary challenges and anxieties, dystopian literature often explores possible futures. By imaginary societies shaped by unchecked technological progress, moral decay, inequality, and loss of freedom, dystopian novels trigger readers to question ideas of progress and perfection. This paper compares two contemporary novels, Japanese author Project Itoh's *Harmony* (2010) and Egyptian author Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2011) in order to analyse both dystopian texts that present very different visions of seemingly ideal societies. The study focuses on how both authors have used the convention of dystopia to critique contemporary concerns. Further, the paper highlights novels warning against the hidden cost of constructing a "perfect" society. Finally, by comparing selected novels in terms of the aim of society, role of technology, control of population and its transmutation in dystopia, the paper argues that when ideologies of control grant privileges exclusively to certain groups then seemingly utopian societies can easily transform to dystopia.

Keywords: Control, Dystopia, Egyptian Literature, Japanese Literature, Technology, Utopia

Introduction

The desire to create a utopia or a harmonious place on earth is a long running theme in literature. Thomas More in 1516 published his Latin work titled *Utopia*, and the term precisely means "no place". Throughout the history of mankind, utopias were present in various forms, be it the Garden of Eden, Greek and Roman stories of the earthly paradise, the idea of a golden age, the Irish 'Vision of MacConglinne' or Plato's *Republic*. Moreover, its essence can be found in Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist China, in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, Buddhist Southeast Asia, and Buddhist and Shinto Japan. As such, utopia has been a significant part of cultures all around the world.

Utopian works serve two main purposes: one is to present an optimism for a better future, as Lyman Sargent wrote, "utopianism is a philosophy of hope, and it is characterized by the transformation of generalized hope into a description of a non-existent society" (8), the other is to critique the contemporary social structure, because "all utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved" (5). In this regard, a utopia can be evaluated in both negative or positive responses. In the twentieth century, the negative evaluation of utopia was common due to the growing diversity in the specific idea of an ideal society. For instance, "Communism in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere, but also... National Socialism in Germany and the Taliban version of Islamism in Afghanistan" (Sargent 9). As such, utopias among varying cultures reflect an era, its background along with its socio-political history. While exploring a utopia, one finds that the dream of paradise may have some common points on which authors tend to agree, such as harmony, equality or justice, but there also lies some major differences which separate them from others. And these differences arise as a result of wars, colonial experience, religious belief and traditional values.

Utopias became a tool in the hands of the authors to highlight the issues prevalent in their time and construct a better society in the future accordingly. The negative utopia or anti-utopian traditions have been continuing since the twentieth century. The problem with earthly utopias as pointed out by Sargent is that either they are poorly constructed or favoured a specific group of individuals.

Project Itoh's *Harmony* (2010) translated into English by Alexander O. Smith and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2011) translated by Chip Rossetti are significant dystopian works of the twenty-first-century that evaluate the idea of a utopian society. While these novels describe societies that appear to be utopian on the outside, they reveal that reality is entirely different from what is portrayed on the surface. Despite varying in social and cultural aspects, both the novels highlight issues of control, dehumanisation and loss of individual freedom, warning that technological perfection and socio-economic inequality can transform a utopian dream into a dystopian nightmare.

Goal of Society

In Itoh's *Harmony*, the aim is to create a peaceful, healthy and conflict-free world. Itoh's society has ridden itself from disease and suffering through a new advanced health app called WatchMe that monitors, traces, stores and analyses human health, and it is expected from individuals to follow the instructions of the health app for collective good. The mandatory health surveillance app WatchMe has reduced humanity to mere data profile. As a result, health is no longer an individual property rather a public asset. For a nation obsessed with health, and equipped with advanced technology, human bodies have become a valuable asset to society which has to be protected at all cost.

In Towfik's novel, *Utopia* is a secluded colony that the elites have created for themselves. It is inclusive of luxury, abundance, security, health, wealth and consumption. Unlike Itoh's health obsessed society, Towfik's Utopia is about luxury and pleasure. Moreover, Towfik's society does not aim for the well being of everyone. Instead, the society is divided into two major classes: the rich and the poor. One is the utopia of the small elite population, the other is the dystopia of the vast neglected one. The protagonist Alaa states, in Utopia "There's a social imbalance that has led to the state we're in, but it's an imbalance that should continue. Everyone who tries to reform it risks losing us everything" (Towfik 8). Alaa's view reflects an elitist viewpoint who support inequality for personal gain. For elites, stability is priority even if it means injustice and inequality to others.

Role of Technology

In *Harmony*, technology serves mankind, and is the basis for the utopian system. With the help of technology-cum-medical App WatchMe and medcare, society is ridden of almost every disease. The app monitors individuals' daily routine, identifies likes and dislikes, traces and tracks emotional trauma, nothing is hidden from its gaze. In this society, it is mandatory for an adult to install WatchMe and attach oneself to admedistration (post-governmental medical conclave) server and accept, receive and follow all the directives from the health consultants. But for teenager Miach,

ramifications of this were obvious: flip a switch, and the medcare unit would go from good to evil, from panacea to plague. The only thing keeping people from doing it was the medcare unit telling them they couldn't. All that stands between us and Armageddon is a little bit of coding. (13)

Miach is able to identify threats that come with technology's promise of a healthy society; the same technology that promises cure can easily become a tool of destruction. Thus, revealing

the fragility of techno-medical utopian society. Further, it highlights human vulnerability because of its complete dependency on technology; if the system fails, the outcome will be dehumanising. In course of time, WatchMe began controlling individuals' behaviour, and it is revealed that WatchMe and medcare units are capable of directing people's bodies in such a way that could be used during a crisis.

In contrast, in Towfik's Utopia, technology is mainly serving the rich. It is employed to increase the security and safety of the elite from the rest of the world. Technology is used to build gated community for seclusion because "the wealthy class realised that there was no life for it unless it became completely isolated, following the same logic behind medieval castles, when rulers would hold decadent parties while pestilence decimated the sea of poverty outside" (Towfik 107). The advanced technology adds more to the luxurious lifestyle of the elite, by providing a privileged fortress while the rest of the population decay.

Control of Population

In *Harmony*, the surveillance app WatchMe is used as a tool of subtle control. The server has turned human bodies into data and has reduced the "physical state to medical terminology and hand the information...over wholesale to some well-meaning admedistration" (Itōh 15). However, the ultimate aim of admedistration was not a healthy society, but to create a "harmonized will inside the human brain", which precisely means the absence of consciousness. For modern man, in perfect accordance with the system, there is no need for consciousness. According to scientists, consciousness is nothing but an agent of desire which provokes creative thinking and results in conflict. Therefore, the admedistration in its pursuit of a harmonious society, wanted to erase consciousness and self awareness from the individuals, because an individual without consciousness is a docile and submissive body that can be manipulated easily for absolute control. Through technological dependence and constant surveillance, the admedistration was able to control the entire population, as Julia Gerhard argues, "for total control of bodies the state executes discipline through constant surveillance to keep all citizens in check. Docile bodies have to be observed and monitored to make sure that they follow the rules, complete their social functions and do not dare to oppose the regime" (52).

In *Utopia*, control is exercised through economic power and social division. The elites dominate society by capturing a solid resource, because they see large profit in it. Alaa's father holds a monopoly over all the medicines on the market. "[t]he prices are unreal, but there's always someone who will buy" (Towfik 42). This is the system's strategy where the elite's hold on resources has transformed a universal need to selective purchasing. The novel, thus critiques a dystopian society where a country's economy is majorly based on its citizens' desperate needs. In this regard, the one with capital holds major power.

Transmogrification into Dystopia

In Itoh's novel, perfect harmony is the absence of consciousness. The moment the scientist entered the codes of the Harmony program, "the individual was no longer or unit. The entire social system was the unit". Subsequently, "No one felt any pain about that any longer. There was no "me" to feel pain. I had been replaced by a single whole, by "society." (Itoh 251). In this regard, individuality, free will and self-awareness (consciousness) are regarded as "a crime in a totalitarian state because it involves an ability to think differently from others or feel emotions; thus, it has to be annihilated" (Gerhard 39). The sole reason behind it is simple— "Control is much easier to achieve when everybody is equal and possesses the same thoughts or ideology, and remains just 'a millionth part of a ton'" (Gerhard 11). Individuals by losing their sense of identity and self-awareness have arrived for the first time at the

perfect bliss. In this regard, Darren Dillman in his article “Resistance in Dystopian Fiction” explains “...the full picture of the authoritarian state is best viewed by a protagonist imbued with a sense of basic individual freedom—freedom of speech, the freedom to organise and protest, the freedom to practise one's religion—an ingrained conviction of right and wrong. (22) As such liberty to speech, protest and practice one's belief system are core to humanity. However, these are the factors that the authorities seek to annihilate. But, in the process of achieving social harmony, the administration has sacrificed individuality and free will. Scholars of medical ethics and health and welfare public policy believe that “the pursuit of medical perfection will inevitably end in vain and ruin our satisfaction, acceptance, and peace of mind”, moreover, they believe that the collective consciousness or “Social solidarity is important and good, but...it is not something we should aim for from the beginning. On the contrary, it is something we achieve naturally and unintentionally as a result of our activities and relations with others” (Asai et al. 3265)

In Towfik's *Utopia*, Alaa, in disguise went outside of utopia for adventure, saw non-utopians' lifestyle, stayed with them, raped a fifteen years old girl, name Safiya, killed her brother Gaber, and returned to his safe haven with a deadman's hand that he had “brandaised, embalmed and dried as a souvenir”. Later, he bragged about his adventure to his friends and felt like a hero who after his outdoor adventures has returned home safely. Nonetheless, not long after his return, an angry mob of rebels was advancing across the desert in organised throngs carrying torches and shouting in anger, and “preparing for a massive attack that would breach the gate and wreak havoc on everyone” (Wessam 46).

Conclusion

At first glance, Itoh's *Harmony* and Towfik's *Utopia* appear optimistic, but as the novels progress, they revealed that perfect or ideal societies in reality are deeply flawed. As Fredric Jameson in “Utopia and Failure”, emphasises that “Utopias have something to do with failure, and tell us more about our own limits and weaknesses than they do about perfect societies” (112). In this sense, utopian visions are less about creating a flawless world but more about depicting issues and imperfections of human beings. The seemingly utopian societies are often built on different modes of oppression. These modes of oppression can be subtle and internalised like in Itoh's *Harmony* or it can be visible and violent as in *Utopia*. Chad Walsh in his book *From Utopia to Nightmare* notes, “The reader looking for current utopias is likely to find them stumbling and unconvincing. But if he wants expertly-presented nightmares, he can choose among a greater variety of horrors than Dante on his pilgrimage through the nine circles of hell” (15). Modern writers find it difficult to imagine realistic utopian societies, however they are adept at constructing realistic dystopian horrors, making dark visions of the future more appealing than ideal ones. Moreover, utopias are always built on ideologies of certain groups or individuals that benefit their own people, be it corporations or governing parties. And such ideologies are laid down in a way that they always reinforce the authority's control over the entire population. Ultimately, both the novels serve warnings that focus on different threats. *Harmony* warns against dangers of technological control, surveillance and forced conformity, and *Utopia* warns against the ramification of extreme class inequality and unchecked privileges. Together these novels demonstrate that seemingly utopian societies can be easily transmogrified to dystopia, if they sacrifice essential human values.

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