



UN-KNOWING THE KNOWN: THE SUBVERSIVE DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVE AND THE OTT PLATFORM

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Abstract: Many independent film makers in India have opted for the OTT platform to launch their dystopian, anti-establishment narratives, which would otherwise have never seen the daylight. As opposed to the mainstream movies, these dystopian stories exhibit the bold employment of the theories of Alienation Effect and Power-and-Discipline which would allow the viewers to better analyze the latent political allegory. The spatial-temporal detachment still manages to critique the contemporary government policies in an oblique way. The curious balancing of the familiar with the unfamiliar generates an element of terror, as to be found in works such as *Ghoul*, *Leila* and *Ghost Stories*. The trope of the dystopian lends these apparently subversive narratives an aesthetic excellence so that they can go beyond the trajectory of mere political agenda.

Key Words: OTT, political, dystopian, defamiliarization, alienation, surveillance, power

I. Introduction:

Following the Indian Supreme Court's 2021 admission of a petition to pre-censor the video-streaming platforms (commonly known as the OTT or over-the-top players), the Indian government is now all set to introduce broad content guidelines for OTTs. The natural consequence of this would surely be the curbing down of the freedom the OTT players have been enjoying since their very early days (Hotstar since 2015, and Netflix India and Amazon Prime Video since 2016). The employment of the dystopian frame has allowed many debutant 'indie' movie makers to try their hand in telling political stories on OTT platforms in a highly satisfactory aesthetic mould in recent past. The present article chiefly focuses on the 2018 Netflix mini-series *Ghoul*, Netflix TV Series *Leila* (2019), and the anthology movie *Ghost Stories* (or rather the Dibakar Banerjee directed short film in this 2020 film), to consider how the employment of the dystopian trope has turned them into by far the most overtly political narratives in recent times. To better understand the working of the dystopian trope on the OTT platform, various strategies related to the *Verfremdungseffekt* (or Distancing/Alienation/Estrangement Effect) and Michel Foucault's theory of Disciplinary Power have been employed and explored.

II. Discussion:

A dystopia is "an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives". (Merriam-Webster) Etymologically speaking, the word *dystopia* takes its origin from the Greek word *topos*, which means "place" in Greek. This is crucial in understanding the way the word now gets contextualized, as the very notion of *dystopia* depends much on the process of

defamiliarization and displacement. “Since dystopias reflect the zeitgeist of the historical periods in which they were produced, they must necessarily take on a variety of guises, and allowances must be made for variation across cultures and epochs.” (Palardy 9) For example, the near future locale of *Ghoul* is unspecified, *Leila* is based in the land named Aryavarta in the late 2040s, *Cargo* (the 2019 Netflix science fiction movie) entirely takes place in an immigration office in space for dead people, and Dibakar Banerjee’s short film in *Ghost Stories* is located in some fictitious Bees-Ghara. The non-specificity or the unknown aspect of the spatial dimension inevitably leads the viewers to expect the unexpected, the bizarre. These dystopian locales are hypothetical ‘neverlands’ featuring characters or situations one should not be expecting to occur in the familiar settings. But therein lies the beauty of the Kafkaesque ‘one-fine-morning’ start of a story in which the apparently logical takes the back seat, and the absurd gets foregrounded. The dystopia at its best is therefore a well-executed balancing of the unknown and the known.

This spatial detachment is integrally related with the *Verfremdungseffekt* or the Alienation Effect. The term *Verfremdungseffekt* is rooted in the Russian Formalist notion of the device of *making strange*, which literary critic Viktor Shklovsky claims is the essence of all art. Indeed, the aforesaid Indian content-makers (the word ‘film’ seems to have lost its etymological context recently) take special care to create an alienated spatio-temporal zone. This purports to let the viewer (the singular better suits the current mode of watching such contents) detach her/himself from the familiar domains and focus on the new territories presented in the narratives. For instance, the zombie-land called Bees-Ghara that Dibakar Banerjee presents in his short film in the anthology *Ghost Stories* is a scathing commentary on the practice of sectarian violence based on caste, while making some oblique references to the pathetic education system in the heart of rural India. A more traditional movie like *Article 15* (2019), that critiques the strong hold of casteism on the general outlook of people in the UP, has been expectedly subjected to the wrath of the Censor Board. Banerjee’s smart infusion of the absurd, Kafkaesque scenario of people (supposedly smitten by caste-based violence) getting dehumanized into a zombie-cum-monkey like entity would metaphorically say all it has to say, and yet escape the blows of censorship. To further ensure the technical security of the film-makers, the director has made use of a frame narrative – the protagonist seems to have ‘seen’ the entire thing in a dream. The strange interplay of knowing and not-knowing however persists even at the closure, as the protagonist encounters the same individuals as he wakes up, although they have presently reverted back to their ‘human’ selves. The film ends with a sense of confusion and doubt regarding the ‘inhuman’ selves of these people; was that merely a vision, or the naked reality lying beneath?

Leila and *Ghoul* might be considered as fine dystopian narratives on the account of a series of criteria enumerated by Diana Q. Palardy in her authoritative book titled the *Dystopian Imagination in Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film*. (Palardy 10-11) To mention a few of them, both the stories present a hypothetical society that ‘might be’; almost all the individuals in the stories are oppressed (by the State?) in one way or other, even though they may not be aware of it; systematic, sociopolitical problems are indeed responsible for the sectarian violence meted out to various characters; one encounters deliberately planned societies meant to keep under surveillance all the potential subversive members of the state; the stories seem to urge the viewers to take immediate measures before it is too late; upon entering the world of the containment zone, one definitely encounters a sense of defamiliarization (as one finds eerie things happening against a somewhat ‘realistic’ backdrop); and finally the women protagonists (Shalini and Nida respectively) are led to a gradual disillusionment and cynicism, and they end up becoming the sole representatives of morality, sanity and conscience in an absurd, dehumanized world.

In essence, a dystopian narrative is concerned with “spatial relationships in what are often hypothetical, technologically advanced, futuristic societies, which are governed by new rules, structures, and values”. (Palardy 10) From the technical perspective, *Leila* would better fit into the category of dystopian narrative. It shows its woman protagonist Shalini (whose husband was a Muslim) being pitted against a situation in which women, who are accused of “sinning” or being somehow defiled, are sent to a “re-education centre” or reprimand house. Treated as slaves and all dressed in red, they are also drugged on a daily basis. A few are chosen to take the purity test, which will supposedly allow them to go back home, but if they fail, they will be sent to a labour camp and never see their families again. (Wiki_Leila) Although the nation of Aryavarta of the late 2040s might be considered as a defamiliarized locale, some elements of familiarity nevertheless haunt the better equipped viewers. The inhuman treatment women are subjected to, the nation being divided into communities separated by high walls and subject to strict segregation, natural resources being on the verge of complete exhaustion, the youth getting brainwashed by the State into becoming soldiers – all these are somehow grounded into the contemporary realities which the mainstream cinema would not dare to portray. The apparently “hypothetical, technologically advanced, futuristic” society then stands for a fine application of the Alienation Effect that distances the viewers so that they can better engage themselves to freely discuss the overtly political narrative. No doubt, the absence of any given time slot in the OTT platforms allows the subscriber to get access to any content she/he wants anytime. The very platform thus celebrates the democratization of video-watching experience from both the ends. And the dystopian backdrop also creates an artistic detachment that might provide the creators a certain amount of safeguard.

The spatial and temporal distancing (or in other words, transferring the locale of the story to a specific point of space-time) is not a compulsion. In a web movie like *Ghoul*, a somewhat allegorical representation of the alarming rise of sectarian violence in current

India, there is no specificity regarding the whereabouts of the containment zone Meghdoot 31 where the events take place. The faithful observance of the so-called ‘Aristotelian’ Three Unities of Action, Time and Place in effect contributes to the “Oppressive, claustrophobic” atmosphere that the director Patrick Graham has confessed to have created. (Wiki_Ghoul) And then again, despite the opening credit reminding the viewers that the entire series of events is happening in the ‘near future’, one cannot escape the uneasy feeling that the story *does* speak of our own time. Beneath the trope of the horror movie, there is a strong undercurrent of anti-establishment which demands justice for authoritarian victimization and persecution on the basis of communal discrimination. It *is*, and also it *is not*, a dystopian movie then. But that is the whole point of a dystopian story – to disengage the reader/audience temporally and spatially for a more comprehensive engagement.

Reminding one of the chief ideas propagated by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, all these web movies or series do focus on the state-endorsed persecution, imprisonment, surveillance and disciplining of the subjects with the intention of having full control over their mind-body. As per the Foucaultian understanding of the Western penal system, the social and theoretical mechanism has never been motivated by humanitarian concerns of the reformists. Since all disciplining mechanisms (schools, hospitals, military barracks etc) are theoretically prison houses of sorts, the State hereby enforces its power over its subjects (both loyal and rebellious) to ensure its ideological as well as physical colonization. Physically imprisoning the subjects is therefore the most convenient measure for the state to ensure its Orwellian surveillance over their activities. The criteria (ethnicity, gender, caste etc) basing upon which the subjects are often put to prison almost always reveal the urge of the privileged to dominate over the non-privileged (though not necessarily the minority). The free-play of thoughts might be seen reflected in the comparative independence enjoyed by the OTT platforms so far. The government policies intending to curb down this freedom is ironically the natural reaction of a democracy which in effect restricts the flourish of the truly able (or the ‘expertise’, as Plato would call it in his *Republic*) in one’s own rights. The unidirectional flow of power accentuates the fact that the dystopia for one sect of people (usually the repressed one) is bound to appear as the utopia for the other (usually those exerting power).

It is all then a matter of perspectives and a story like *Ghoul* charts the growth of the protagonist Nida’s perception as she starts seeing the well-advertised utopia to be nothing but a dystopia in actuality. The revelation comes only when she defies to be used as a state apparatus and asserts her own individuality. Unfortunately that is the moment when she gets branded as a potential threat for the smooth working of the state, and it is followed by the natural ramification; i.e. her imprisonment. Beneath the supernatural garb, *Ghoul* is a strong critique of the ‘rehabilitation’ of people with anti-government mentalities for ‘cleansing’ in secretly set up detention facilities across India. The ‘backdated’ but at the same time ‘more effective’ measures employed in Meghdoot 31 might have some bearing upon the “torture techniques used after 9/11 and at Camp X-Ray and the reports of military centres in Kashmir” (Wiki_Ghoul). In contrast to the popular expectation that a futuristic society must resort to high-tech torturing instruments, *Ghoul* depicts the use of simplistic, terror-inducing torturing methods, as if to underscore the primitive brutality associated with the whole process. The ulterior motive is to form a strictly regimented, loyal, sub-human species of subjects, and *Ghoul*, not unlike *Leila* and *Ghost Stories*, portrays the state taking up desperate measures to achieve that ends.

Finally, it is the element of terror that allows the dystopian story to further play the engage-disengage game with the viewers. *Ghoul*, at least on the surface level, is a horror story with its focus on the eponymous Arab folklore monster. Yet, it is a horror movie not because what it shows, but because what it implies. (Wiki_Ghoul) The ruthless aggression and violence meted out by the state to better control its citizens is a theme treated in both *Leila* and *Ghost Stories*. It is interesting to note that Dibakar Banerjee’s brutal portrayal of the violence engendered by caste-based discrimination is anything but a ‘ghost’ story; therefore wrongly labeled as such. Yet it manages to terrify the viewers in its own rights. The purpose of these stories is to get the viewers acquainted with the element of terror, repression and violence underlying the false notion of the ‘benign’ state ceaselessly working for the empowerment and betterment of its subjects.

III. Conclusion:

The success of the dystopian trope depends much on the OTT platform which most often provides content to the subscriber following a WhatsApp-like end-to-end encryption. Unlike the mainstream political satires (such as 2017 movie *Newton*) the OTT content-makers do not have to resort to the mould of comedy. Although comedy happens to be another powerful device to generate Alienation Effect, it might just lighten the terrifying atmosphere that the concerned dystopian narratives have carefully built up. The dystopian stories are self-conscious of their own gravity which they carefully attempt to preserve at any cost. The OTT platform is integrally related to the dystopian narrative also because both endeavour to challenge and thereby expose the constant surveillance of the state over creative content. Self-reflexive in their own way, the dystopian narratives are therefore best fitted and exclusively meant for the OTT platform which engages the viewers with its bold content as well as unique treatment. The Censor Board, the self-proclaimed watchdog of the authorities of all societies in all ages, have not yet been capable to put such ‘free’ contents under their scrutiny for the lack of any clear-cut rule to delimit the freedom of the OTT platforms. The prospect of the implementation of new broadcasting rules regarding the OTT

content will definitely affect the strategies of the content-makers in the country. It is perhaps the dystopian format which will allow the free thinkers to keep delivering anti-establishment contents without being explicitly critical of the contemporary controversial issues.

IV. References:

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