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Analysing the Thematic Interplay of Survival and Humanity in Selected Dystopian Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the thematic interplay of survival and humanity in selected dystopian literature, analysing the tension between the primal instinct for self-preservation and the ethical imperatives of human civilisation. Focusing on Oryx and Crake *by Margaret Atwood (2003),* Never Let Me Go *by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005),* The Road *by Cormac McCarthy (2006), and* The Women Could Fly *by Megan Giddings (2022), the study focuses on the dystopian settings of these works, marked by destruction, catastrophe, and the struggle for survival. Employing close reading and thematic analysis through various critical lenses, the research examines how these narratives interrogate the fragility of human values when confronted with existential threats. The analysis examines conditions of survival in these dystopian worlds which entails more than the continuation of life—it demands navigating the fragile balance between moral and ethical integrity and the instinctive drive to endure. The characters' struggles expose the disintegration of societal norms and the primal instincts that emerge under extreme conditions. Through this thematic exploration, the texts highlight the costs of survival, not just in terms of mortality but also in the erosion of humanity's moral compass. The findings emphasise that the true stakes of survival extend beyond individual existence, posing deep questions about the endurance of civilisation's ethical foundations amidst unbearable odds. Ultimately, the study underlines how dystopian literature serves as a powerful medium to critique contemporary human values, offering insights into the resilience and vulnerability of humanity in the face of odds.*

Key words: Dystopian, Survival, Humanity, thematic interplay

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Introduction

In dystopian settings, the struggle for survival takes place against the violence and cruelty happening in the backdrop of society that has or is on the way of losing its moral direction, as both religious beliefs, human rationality and morality fail to provide guidance in catastrophic surroundings. As the setting of the fictional world is built upon futuristic vision of the actual reality of the society, for readers it warningly drafts a question whether humanity is truly moving towards progressive future with all the advancement of the present; or towards in directed destruction. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* the quest of survival hangs upon the characters' resistance from acceptance of predominant fate; challenging the notion of free will, individual autonomy and human dignity. *Oryx and Crake* by Margret Atwood explore genetic manipulation and societal collapse to the point of catastrophe that leads towards the edge of desperate need of foundational reconsideration of ethics & morals. Survival is stripped to its rawest and wildest form in the middle of post-apocalyptic destruction in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. In *The Women Could Fly* written by Megan Giddings the theme of survival

is considered from women's perspectives, their navigation in oppressive as well threatening patriarchal society and a quest to reclaim a sense of humanity. Throughout all these selected texts the characteristics of survival are interwoven in the humanity aspect; with confrontation of choices that opens with and concludes on questioning empathy, morality as well from an essential perspective of what 'human' identity means in a world on the threshold of destruction.

Literature Review

The literature analysis reveals that the genre of dystopian literature has been studied from various critical perspectives, encompassing psychoanalysis, existentialism, memory studies, bioethics, and posthumanism. Studies on dystopian literature have explored its role as a medium for social criticism, examining themes such as totalitarianism, capitalism, fascism, environmental degradation, and scientific ethics. However, the thematic exploration of survival and humanity remains underexplored, particularly in the context of contemporary dystopian works such as *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, and *The Women Could Fly* by Megan Giddings.

M. Leith Booker's seminal work, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (1994), investigates the genre as a vehicle for critiquing social and political systems. Analysing canonical 20th-century dystopian works such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *1984*, Booker grounds her analysis in psychoanalytic and existential theories, focusing on post-WWII, communist, and postmodernist dystopias. While her study offers valuable insights, it overlooks alternative critical perspectives, such as Marxist and feminist readings, and limits its scope to 20th-century canonical texts. This study provides a foundational theoretical framework that can be extended to contemporary dystopian literature.

Carter F. Hanson's *Memory and Utopian Agency in Utopian/Dystopian Literature: Memory of the Future* (2020) examines the role of memory in shaping utopian and dystopian narratives. By analysing various novels, including Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*, Hanson highlights memory's importance in imagining better societies and learning from dystopian consequences. This research is particularly relevant for understanding the dystopian edge of memory in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, offering a framework for exploring how memory intertwines with themes of survival and humanity.

Katherine V. Snyder's article "'Time to Go': The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" (2011) analyses the interplay between post-apocalyptic and post-traumatic themes in the novel. Highlighting the fragmented narrative structure that reflects Snowman's psychological struggles, Snyder's work connects individual trauma to societal experiences. This research can be extended by incorporating Marxist and bioethical perspectives to further explore the novel's thematic depth.

Arnab Chatterjee's article "Exploring an Anti-Utopian Subtext in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" (2019) investigates how Ishiguro subverts traditional pastoral themes to create a dystopian narrative. By depicting an idyllic boarding school with a sinister undertone, Ishiguro critiques broader biopolitical structures through the anti-pastoral lens. Chatterjee's analysis lays the groundwork for examining the novel's portrayal of survival and humanity within a dystopian framework.

The article "'All These Things He Saw and Did Not See': Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" (2013) explores the novel's post-apocalyptic world through an anthropological lens. It examines the relationship between scientific advancement and environmental exploitation, underscoring the interconnected fates of humanity and the natural world. This perspective is essential for understanding how survival is intricately tied to humanity's ethical choices.

Jihun Yoo's article "Transhumanist, Utopian Vision and Reversing Dystopia in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*" (2019) examines the transhumanist impulses driving post-apocalyptic narratives in dystopian societies. Yoo reflects on the ethical implications of unchecked scientific advancements, such as bioengineering, and extends this analysis to Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. This study broadens the theoretical framework by linking survival to the ethical dilemmas of scientific progress.

Jay Clayton's article "The Ridicule of Time: Science Fiction, Bioethics, and the Posthuman" (2013) delves into the relationship between science fiction, bioethics, and posthumanism. Clayton's work highlights how these themes influence societal attitudes toward technological advancements and human evolution, contributing to the analysis of futuristic societies in *Oryx and Crake* and *Never Let Me Go*.

These studies demonstrate the rich critical discourse surrounding dystopian literature, yet none have specifically focused on the intertwined themes of survival and humanity across contemporary dystopian works. This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring these themes through a nuanced lens in selected dystopian texts, contributing to the broader understanding of how dystopian narratives redefine humanity in the face of survival challenges.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis to examine thematic interplay of survival and humanity in selected dystopian novels: *Never Let Me Go*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Road*, and *The Women Could Fly*; the primary data consists of close reading these novels. Characters, dialogues, structure, and motifs are carefully examined for the study of themes of survival and humanity. This research uses various critical theories as lenses in order to analyse thematic depiction of survival and humanity within texts. These critical lenses include: posthumanism and Transhumanism to examine societal influence of genetic manipulation and scientific advancement within *Oryx and Crake* and *Never Let Me Go*. Michael Foucault's concept of Biopolitics in order to study authoritarian and capitalist control over bodies and lives in dystopian societies. Existentialism and absurdism philosophies in order to reveal the fundamental struggle for meaning and identity amidst the chaos of dystopia. Ecocriticism to examine the impacts of environmental degradation on the hypothetical future of humanity. Feminist lens for the examination of women's position and identity within narratives. Secondary data, including journal articles and papers are revived to supplement the theoretical framework of the research.

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Analysis

***Oryx and Crake*:** Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is a dystopian novel blending science and speculative fiction, exploring themes of survival and humanity in a post-apocalyptic world shaped by unchecked scientific advancement and corporate greed. The narrative follows Snowman, the sole human survivor, and the Crakers, genetically engineered post-human beings created by Crake, a scientist who sought to eliminate humanity's flaws, such as aggression and envy. Crake's vision, however, results in catastrophic societal collapse, raising questions about the ethical consequences of transhumanism and humanity's pursuit of power over nature.

The novel interweaves two timelines: Snowman's recollections of pre-catastrophic society, marked by extreme inequalities, commodification, and environmental degradation, and his present struggle for survival in a desolate world. The past of society reflects corporate exploitation, as seen in Crake's use of impoverished communities for unethical experiments, exposing the commodification of human bodies. This backdrop critiques humanity's destructive relationship with the environment and relentless pursuit of profit.

Snowman's existential crisis highlights the collapse of identity and morality in a world stripped of social structures. His reluctance to lead the Crakers mirrors his internal conflict as a survivor haunted by guilt and trauma. The Crakers' engineered innocence contrasts with Snowman's fragmented memories, emphasising the psychological toll of witnessing civilisation's downfall. The narrative's fragmented structure conveys disorientation and the fragile nature of memory in coping with trauma.

Atwood critiques humanity's destructive tendencies while examining the ethical implications of technological advancement. Crake's creation of the environmentally harmonious Crakers comes at the cost of an apocalyptic erasure of humanity. The novel underscores the need for ethical introspection and sustainable practices to avoid such dystopian futures. Ultimately, Oryx and Crake serve as a cautionary tale, through the thematic interplay of survival and humanity, urging reflection on the values that define humanity and the consequences of neglecting them in the pursuit of progress.

***Never Let Me Go*:** Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is a dystopian novel set in a late-1990s England where medical science has advanced to the point of creating clones for organ harvesting. These clones are raised in institutions like Hailsham, a boarding school that fosters art and creativity but ultimately serves as a façade for their grim purpose. The novel explores themes of identity, mortality, and morality through the perspective of Kathy H., a clone reflecting on her life as a carer for organ donors.

The clones are denied basic human rights, their lives predetermined by a utilitarian society that values them only for their organs. Miss Lucy's revelation to the students "*Your lives are set out for you"* (69) exemplifies the dehumanising ideology that reduces them to mere commodities. Viewed through a Marxist lens, the clones symbolise the exploited underclass in a capitalist system, their labour and bodies serving the elite's interests.

Hailsham's experiment, which sought to prove the clones' humanity through their art, ultimately failed due to public resistance. This highlights the ethical dilemma of prioritising medical advancements over moral values, as society chooses the well-being of the majority at

the expense of a marginalised minority. The serene environment of Hailsham juxtaposes the harsh realities awaiting the clones, underscoring the anti-utopianism of the narrative.

Themes of existentialism emerge as Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth grapple with their limited futures. Despite their predestined fate, they seek meaning through relationships, dreams, and the hope of deferral, a futile attempt to escape their destiny. Their longing for individuality and agency, exemplified in Ruth's search for her "*possible*" and Kathy's caregiving, underscores their intrinsic humanity.

Biopolitical control, as theorised by Michel Foucault, is evident in the clones' lives, regulated from birth to death to serve societal needs. This paradoxical system acknowledges their humanity only when convenient, as revealed by Miss Emily's statement, *"We did it to prove you had souls at all."* (215) exposes the systemic violence and existential fragility inflicted on them.

Ultimately, the clones' emotions and connections transcend their utilitarian purpose, affirming their humanity in a society that denies it. Kathy's final reflection on her lost friends *"I won't lose my memories of them"* (237) highlights the enduring power of human connection amidst systemic dehumanisation. Never Let Me Go questions whether sacrificing humanity is justified for survival, challenging readers to confront the moral cost of progress.

***The Road*:** Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is a harrowing portrayal of a father and son's journey through a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Set in a world devastated by an unnamed catastrophe, the story exposes the fragility of civilisation and the raw instinct for survival. The father's commitment to "*carry the fire*" symbolises a desperate attempt to preserve morality and hope amidst chaos. In contrast, the boy's innocence and compassion represent humanity's enduring ethical core, creating tension between the survivalist instincts of the father and the empathetic values of the son. The father's protective love and determination to shield his son from harm, even at the cost of moral ambiguity, provide an existential lens on finding purpose in a purposeless world.

The novel's barren landscapes—burnt forests, polluted skies, and lifeless oceans—underscore humanity's ecological destruction, hinting at climate change or nuclear disaster. The grim depiction serves as a warning of nature's collapse, intertwined with humanity's extinction. Despite the bleakness, the enduring image of a brook trout at the novel's end suggests nature's resilience and the possibility of regeneration.

From a feminist perspective, the absence of women highlights the gendered portrayal of survival narratives. The mother's suicide reflects her agency in rejecting a life of unrelenting suffering, challenging traditional expectations of women's roles as caregivers. Her absence underscores the predominantly masculine experience of survival in dystopian literature.

Ultimately, The Road examines the duality of survival, not merely as a fight for life but as a struggle to uphold humanity's moral and ethical values. The father's mantra of "carrying the fire" signifies the enduring quest for hope, love, and compassion, even in a world stripped of meaning. This act of resilience suggests that humanity's true essence lies in maintaining these values, even in the face of desolation.

The Women Could Fly: Megan Giddings' dystopian novel *The Women Could Fly* (2022) introduces a world governed by patriarchal oppression, where women's autonomy is

systematically stripped through societal, institutional, and political mechanisms. The title's passive modal verb "could" evoke a sense of potential without realisation, raising questions about the restrictions placed on women's agency. The novel masterfully explores themes of survival, humanity, and resistance, centring on Josephine Thomas, a biracial, bisexual woman navigating a society where magic is real but criminalised. Here, women face surveillance, forced conformity, and the constant threat of accusations of witchcraft, which often result in public executions.

Josephine's struggle mirrors contemporary feminist concerns, including intersectionality, performativity, and the oppressive expectations of compulsory heterosexuality. The state mandates marriage by age 30, reducing women to reproductive and domestic roles. Unmarried women like Josephine face government registration and invasive monitoring, reinforcing patriarchal control and silencing dissent. These rigid structures resonate with historical witch trials, where women who defied norms were dehumanised and executed.

The novel also examines the complexities of motherhood through Josephine's relationship with her long-lost mother, Tiana, a witch who abandoned her family for freedom. Tiana's choice challenges institutionalised ideals of motherhood, echoing Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born (1986)* in its critique of societal expectations of maternal sacrifice and passivity. Josephine's response to her mother's decision highlights the tension between individual autonomy and societal obligations.

Giddings weaves intersectional issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, exposing the vulnerabilities of marginalised identities in a corrupt system. Despite her precarious position, Josephine's survival, culminating in her miraculous escape from execution, symbolises resistance. The narrative diverges from typical dystopian bleakness, offering hope and the possibility of liberation. By imagining alternative futures and reclaiming autonomy, *The Women Could Fly* redefines survival as an act of defiance and a pathway to reclaiming humanity, challenging the oppressive forces of a dehumanising patriarchy.

Conclusion

This paper on thematic analysis of survival and humanity provides valuable insights into the dystopian genre, showcasing its impact through a detailed exploration of selected novels. The conclusions drawn from each are as follows (1) Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood, the novel critiques humanity's unchecked pursuit of scientific advancement and capitalist greed, exposing the ethical and environmental costs. It emphasises the erosion of moral values and humanity in a world driven by consumerism and bioengineering, urging reflection on the balance between progress and ethics. (2) Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro, the narrative probes the bioethical dilemma of cloning for human survival, questioning the justification of sacrificing others' humanity. Despite societal dehumanisation, the preservation of love, memory, and friendship becomes a metaphor for resistance and affirms the enduring value of humanity. (3) The Road by Cormac McCarthy, in a barren, post-apocalyptic world, the struggle for survival is intertwined with the preservation of morality and humanity. The father and son's journey reveals that carrying the "fire" of hope, love, and ethical values is the ultimate testament to human resilience in the face of existential despair. (4) *The Women Could Fly* by Megan Giddings, the novel critiques patriarchal oppression under the guise of witchcraft

persecution. Josephine's survival against systemic dehumanisation symbolises resistance and the reclamation of autonomy. It offers a rare note of hope in the genre, advocating for alternative possibilities and personal defiance as a path to freedom.

In conclusion, the analysis reveals that in dystopian settings the stakes at the cost of survival are not merely life, mortality, but sustenance of values of humanity, morality and ethics, in face of unbearable odds; exposing the fragility of mask of civilisation and the primal instinct that becomes apparent in desperate struggle for survival. The selected works challenge readers to confront the consequences of societal trajectories, emphasising the critical need to safeguard humanitarian values in the face of advancing power systems and crises. This paper contributes to the growing field of dystopian literature studies by emphasising the thematic interplay of survival and humanity. It invites further critical and interdisciplinary exploration of the genre, particularly through the application of diverse critical lenses to uncover deeper insights into the human condition and its evolving values in dystopian narratives.

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