

# Exposition of Dystopia as a Posthumanist Reality in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

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## **Abstract**

The literature that preceded the late twentieth century was prescient in its renunciation of the traditional forms of writing and narratives; it predicted a war-torn aftermath and with it, different experimental ways to deconstruct the abysmal state of affairs all around the world and Europe, in particular. The desire for utopia was swiftly overthrown by the reality of a world brought to ruins by powers relentlessly trying to seize control of the citizens. The “dystopian” milieu rendered in the works of the twentieth century bears the transition that literature was going through on account of the totalitarian tendencies gaining widespread traction. Dystopian writers highlight the posthumanist condition of man wherein he is viewed as an adjunct to the technological and scientific developments. They use their works to issue warnings about the status of the socio-political construct. With the idea of cultivating a spiritual core and seeking solutions for social problems, dystopian writers call for introspection, progress, and self-improvement. This paper studies Ray Bradbury's depiction of dystopia in *Fahrenheit 451* and how he uses his authorial power to investigate and denounce authoritative monolithism. His presentation of dystopia is looked at from a posthumanist lens. The paper attributes most space to technological domination and its subversive influence on the citizens of a state.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Fahrenheit 451, Posthumanism, Technology, Ray Bradbury, Totalitarianism

## **Introduction**

To delve into the intricacies warranting a clear understanding of what posthumanism entails, it becomes incumbent upon the readers to take up the dexterous task of learning about humanism. The Renaissance instilled this idea of the freedom of a man and his dissociation from the manacles of the world, conspicuous or otherwise. The perception of human as the only rational/social/political being is the cornerstone of humanism. In a more technical parlance, the doctrine of humanism attests to the presence of a thinking ego – a universal capability to reason that connects the entirety of humankind. Humanism essentially translates to the singular deftness of conceptualizing the workings of life, and interpreting and reinterpreting them in different ways by wielding the power of the mind. This was the central idea of humanism – acknowledging how humans differ from the rest of the world in their potentialities and competencies and thus are rendered superior to all other living or non-living entities pervading the mortal world. Since time immemorial, scholars and theorists have attempted to deconstruct the role that consciousness and reason play in attributing autonomy to an individual. We are the only living beings characterised with the ability to exercise influence. This human centrism is overthrown in a posthumanist milieu, and the way is thus paved for a radical overhaul of man's position in the larger scheme of things. According to Moore and Moran (2007), posthumanism delinks the human being from

an ideological centre and calls into question his bearing as the foundation of all ontological scholarship. The classical and western thought, on the one hand, averred that the human species is the hinge which determines the order of things, posthumanism, on the other hand, asserted a staunch reconsideration and review of the sacrosanctness associated with human beings.

### **Posthumanist Attitudes and the Rise of Dystopia**

Embedded within and emanated out of the postmodernist movement, posthumanism is informed by countless entities that were hitherto glossed over on account of an implacable worldview vis-a-vis the position of humans within the ontological framework. With the advent and evolution of technology, the humanist sensibility has slowly been taken over by more palpable aspects, material scientific changes being the paramount of these. Since the focus has now shifted to other living and non-living entities, their influence on the lived reality has also become pronounced. The human being is not just a fulcrum now; he is the prey and the predator, the participant and the bystander, and has assumed several other roles within the larger cobweb of existence. Several epistemes of material science, science and technology studies, animal studies, transgender studies surface and the more we engage with them, the greater alacrity we have in questioning and defying what it actually means to be human. Harrison (2019) studies this multiplicity of branches of knowledge as the possibility of multiple realities and not just our own. Dystopia, therefore, is a popular genre that finds its roots in the copiously melded postmodernist literary canon. The abundance and inter-mingling of new ideas has drilled a lacuna in the humanist order of things. The gradual shrinking and the ultimate rupturing of anthropocentric ideas has invariably caused the blurring of the ethical and moral bases of society. This has led to the rise of posthumanist attitudes and their dystopian underpinnings. *Review of Utopian and Dystopian Novels* attempts a holistic review of utopian and dystopian literature from the standpoint of domestic and western research respectively (Bai, 2011, pp.165-166). The world is no longer measured by the mere existence of man. They are neither the birther nor the apogee of evolution. Their standing in the socio-political construct is not predetermined superior and their role and participation in the society is leveled. Notwithstanding, posthumanism does not mark the end of all that is considered human. It allows the man to endure changes percolating the social landscape and exist in conditions that are always in a state of flux. Dystopia, thus, is the natural consequence of the posthuman age. Ray Bradbury is one of the forerunners of this genre of literature. Dystopian fiction like Bradbury's stems from the scientific plausibility that the age of posthumanism offers and makes way for. In today's ever-changing world, scientific inventions have become intrinsic to the novel temperament of the age. Science has successfully been able to revolutionize the world we live in and helped mitigate dependency on one another. There is a sudden propagation of theories and ideas that privilege science and technology over other epistemological branches. This dissemination of technology is commensurate with our fast-paced world. Technology catapults mankind to an unparalleled measure and makes it difficult for us to determine the distinction between science and fiction. The scientific facts interpenetrate fiction, thereby presenting a confounding bricolage of reality and make believe. The fantastical elements populating the works of science fiction writers tend to cross over to the realm of reality. Zipes (1983) defines "dystopian fiction" and explains that the likes of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which went on to epitomize the entire generation thereafter, showed microcosmic representations of a society that was evidently superior to the one in which the author lived. *Utopia* by More helped people come to grips with the idea of an idyllic society completely divested of avarice, power, corruption, or other morally

debasement vices. Although a satire, it was successful in driving home the idea of a utopia and consequently, its implausibility in a real world. Utopian fiction of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was vehemently led on by a robust belief in the social benefits and a progressive impetus of technology. Technology was seen as exhibiting remedial properties for a society marred by countless social and political evils. However, when the reality set in and the wars were fought using the most advanced armaments, the former ideas were openly shunned, and technology was viewed with a collective disdain, capable of demolishing civilisations. Therefore, the postwar period was infused with a feeling of discomfiture that led to the emergence of dystopian or anti-utopian fiction. Dystopian fiction envisions an apocalyptic idea of a future world wherein the people are subordinates to machines and technology. Human life is subservient to the machinations of science. Instead of benefiting the mankind, the advancements wreck havoc at the behest of the powerful and their pursuit of self-interest. Posthumanist studies fostered a waxing interest in the fields of information science and atomic energy, facilitating rampant mechanisation and calling forth a spate of science fiction works that were written from the purview of postmodernism. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is a quintessential example of dystopian science fiction that engenders horror and terror, and issues a caveat to a society under absolute control of technology.

### **Dystopia and Dehumanisation in *Fahrenheit 451***

It was in the late 1940s that Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* and published it in 1950 against the backdrop of the aftermath of the Second World War. This was also the time when differences between the two factions of the democratic U.S.A and the communist U.S.S.R underscored the ideological chasm between them; the former was operating under the growing fear of communism and its prospective spread in the West. Bradbury builds on the theme developed by George Orwell in his 1949 work *1984* and expounds the thematic concerns of censorship and forced conformity, where books are burned and reading is dubbed an offense to the regime. The novel is a scathing denunciation of irrationality and monolithism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where people in power sought to confine free thinking and suppress individuality. The vicious side of communism, first brought to the forefront by Orwell, has been elucidated by Bradbury through his depiction of the grim atmosphere of surveillance. *Fahrenheit 451* has firemen who, instead of their traditional job of extinguishing fire, are responsible for starting it in places where there is surreptitious defiance of the orders of the ruling government and books are still read. The propagandists slyly manipulate people into thinking that reading holds no value, that it results in an unnecessary furore in a socio-political setting and that books need to be completely obliterated. This conditioning, when taken to an extreme, assumes the shape of indoctrination and leads people to conform with the oppressive tendencies of the regime. The manipulation takes place mostly through television as well as other forms of media. In order to stymie the thinking prowess of people, the government takes it upon itself to exercise power by dictating what kind of information should reach people and what should be carefully kept from them. It seeks to maintain social order by straitjacketing the voice of people and effacing their individuality. Beatty apprises Montag of how everyone is made to live happily: “Not everyone is born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other, then all is happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against” (Bradbury, p. 28). Beatty’s remarks reverberate state sanctioned control and censorship that Hitler and the Nazis had resorted to during World War II when they had burned countless books to quash individual spirit and free thinking. To further their agenda, Nazis set up state

controlled schools and a propaganda machine using the new technology that allowed them to censor ideas, views, opinions that seemed injurious to their survival. They regulated the flow of information in the public domain and ensured spread of censored content by drawing people's consent. People became complicit in their own oppression. The U.S. in its attempt to grapple with the fear of rapidly growing Communist tendencies, responded by censoring its own media. The judges, university professors and intellectuals working in other coveted positions had to bear the brunt of the government's restriction of dissent and free speech. They were administered by the government's need for loyalty oaths. Faber and Granger in *Fahrenheit 451* represent the iconoclasts who decided to break away from such coercive impositions and safeguard their intellectual pursuits. Faber hid himself to stave off the tyranny of such laws, and Granger sought refuge in the city's outskirts with the remaining book lovers who were hiding from persecution. Like Orwell's *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451* chronicles the quandaries of a population governed by a group of authoritarian despots. The motif of psychological oppression meted out to people reigns supreme in the novel. Guy Montag is a victim of the dehumanising effects of a mechanical world who goes from a book-burning fireman to a book-reading rebel. His transition is marked by a few uncomfortable encounters with a young girl who questions the status quo and makes him understand the spiritual depravity of a world deeply mired in routine. Despite a technologically rich house, Montag's life is marked by connubial discord. His wife fails to share his perspective on their emotional disconnect with the world and with each other. His house is described as a "mausoleum" but he is oblivious of why he works as a fireman or why he is expected to burn down all the books. Mildred is bereft of emotions and is estranged from Montag. She only engages in puerile, hollow forms of entertainment and only interacts with the people from television. The killing of Clarisse by a speeding car demonstrates the dispensable nature of human life and the callousness with which a life is treated by totalitarian forces. The dichotomy between technology serving as an aid to curtail human labour and technology as a barrier to authentic human connection is highlighted. For every way in which technology improves human life, it is man who lets it flourish at the expense of spiritual richness as we see in the life of the characters mentioned above.

### **Usurpation of Basic Rights and Book Burning as Markers of Dystopia in Bradbury**

Right to freedom is one of the fundamental rights accorded to humans to guarantee them agency. The liberty to act of their own volition is an enabler and helps people take charge of their own life. Being robbed of this right to exercise one's freedom stultifies the very basis of existence. Books denote that freedom, that chance to know the world from myriad perspectives. They are the primary source for people to gain knowledge. The firefighters in *Fahrenheit 451* have no qualms in indulging in arson to go about their mission of burning down all books. They have to discharge their duty of burning books as soon as they get hold of them. Television, radio and other means of communication have replaced books. The frivolity of mass media undercuts the gravity of books, and this hostility towards books is what is encouraged. The decline of books is justified and described as follows:

...Then, in the twentieth century, speed up your camera. Books cut shorter. Condensations. Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. ... Classics cut to fit fifteen minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up at last as a ten- or twelve- line dictionary resume (Bradbury, 1996, p.43).

Freedom comes in multiple forms; it is the idea that rests at the centre of ontological inquiry. Freedom of thought connotes freedom to make choices and judgments without any external intervention. It means

having the right to conjure, interpret, understand a motley of theories, views, beliefs, etc. in one's own unique way. Not only has the totalitarian government in the novel exercised considerable restraint on the freedom of speech of people, it has also encroached upon their faculties, thereby criminalizing them for their outlandish acts of defiance. The title of the novel implies the burning of a paper over a certain, precise temperature; 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the ignition point at which a paper, when subjected to fire, starts burning. The title serves as a sardonic acceptance of a certain order of things whereby people lead themselves to believe that nothing really is amiss in their idyllic world. 'Fahrenheit 451' portrays a falsehood in the garb of truth; it is shown as a peaceful utopia wherein people engage with images and entertaining TV programs, rarely interact with each other, and vehemently try to repudiate any encounter with reality. Banning of books tends to stagnate the thought process and deters people from retaining their ability to reason and rationalise. The burning down of books by firefighters is a routine occurrence, and the majority is duped into taking it as normal. Captain Beatty once gave a warning to Montag:

A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won't stomach them for a minute. And so when houses were finally fireproofed completely, all over the world there was no longer need of firemen for the old purposes. They were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind (Bradbury, 1996, p.58).

The violent influx of advertisements and the television wall caused people to lose their own sense of self and expression. Suffice it to say, the totalitarian nature of the government in the novel imposes itself on the social fabric and thus, on the pliant minds of people. The general public accepts coercion and the burning of books does not elicit responses that it ideally should. This apathy indicates the rise of a dystopian world.

### **Totalitarianism Vs Freedom**

Every person is born with a unique idea of what truly their essence is and thus, has a unique individuality. Individuality assimilates in itself one's perception of their own identity as well as their creativity and subjectivity. It also encapsulates some elements like strengths, weaknesses, interests, likes, dislikes that are different for all. To be severed from exhibiting an individuality of one's own is to decapitate the soul from the body. Development of an individuality is also crucial for the cause of change and social revival. This is why totalitarian rulers detest the freedom to exercise one's own free will and enforce their identity; they are intimidated by its power to shake autocracy. The people in the novel combat loss of identity and agency since they suffer from nebulous cognition of their own roles. In a world fraught with images from mass media, they feel distanced from their real selves. Montag and Mildred's relationship lacks warmth and affection. The nonchalance of Montag's colleagues towards the social unrest and spiritual decay makes him uneasy, and this feeling of estrangement from them is what propels him to think different and go astray. People have been reified into objects since they are divorced from any form of physical or emotional proximity; images on TV become more real than the the real world itself. Mildred's fascination with the visual world is in sharp antithesis with her attitude towards her husband and the social upheaval. The severity of the taut situation is downplayed by the levity of Mildred and the likes of her. The preoccupation with television kept people from asking the important questions – why did Montag collect books? Or why did people go along with the decision of the government to burn books? Equating reading with participation in anti-social activities destabilises the organic whole and completes the picture of a dystopia. The picture is further amplified by

convoluted workings of the media which collaborated with the police to project the scenes of stabbing of an innocent as the killing of Montag. The unfortunate fact remains that the audience failed to challenge the world of images and accepted it as the only and ideal way of experiencing lived realities. Montag, however, marks a departure from people around him in that he attempts to break away from the drudgery of his surroundings by holding on to his creative recesses. From a firefighter assigned the duty of burning books to a fugitive taking responsibility for protecting books, the transition marks his self-salvation and redemption. The woman who sets herself on fire rather than relinquishing her books only ameliorates his resolve to defy the majoritarian regime and its dictatorial reign. The company of Faber piqued his interest in books and he started reading them while on duty. Beatty, the captain, foils Montag's plans and attempts to arrest him but in vain. Montag's killing of Beatty and joining a group of people who save books is emblematic of the potential reconstruction of the world. The rulers advocating absolutism and their bastions deployed a host of ways to sustain their power – fire brigades, bombers, robotic hounds. They are duty bound to intercept, fight, monitor and annihilate ideas, their eruption and their spread. Any activity that prompts free thinking is deemed a threat to the domination of the ruler. Reading is, therefore, considered an aberration. The fixation of the citizens with the illusory and fallacious world of television and images prevents them from associating themselves with perceptions rooted in reality. The world that they are sucked into, obfuscates notions of suffering and plants false views of society in their minds. The allurements of the other world makes them prisoners to its rigid ways to the degree that they are willing to become subjects of an authoritarian rule. Dystopian novels like *Fahrenheit 451* underline the greed and the want of power latent in mankind. Bradbury is poignant in his depiction of a credo that normalises arson and systemic oppression. The manner in which propaganda of the ruler is manufactured, circulated and consumed only speaks volumes of the humbuggery and duplicitous nature of the people being oppressed. The novel is rife with the presence of cars, televisions and technological paraphernalia. There is a deliberate effort by the government to sway public opinion by overwhelming their audiovisual senses. Television is the primary source of 'their' utopia, which in reality actualizes the dystopian nature of the novel. Mildred thinks it gives her agency as she constantly interacts with it and the images she is privy to. Despite her overexposure to the television, she still thinks the three TV walls in her home are not enough. The fact that the absence of a fourth wall still leaves her scope to engage with the real world is disconcerting for her, hence she insists on building it. The fourth wall alleviates her dire need her maintaining an illusory existence. It ascribes her a way to keep herself out of the realm of reality. For her, it is an instrument of power that keeps her immersed in the virtual utopia and tethers her from the grimness of life. This way of living prevents her from forging real relations with others, making her complicit in the state's perpetuation of oppression.

### **Posthumanist Onslaught of Technology**

The posthumanist age has made technology more accessible and with that, has pushed man into the periphery. Man is constantly watched and traced owing to the technologically charged and scientifically advanced society albeit with little to no privacy concerns. Mechanical Hound in the novel is one such example that is used by the captain to allay his suspicions of Montag's defiance; helicopters are also used to picture and chase him when he refutes laws. The postwar sentiment of xenophobia and censorship are being mirrored and derided here. The veneer of peacekeeping makes the government use cars like "Beetles" to run over innocent people like Clarisse. The readers slowly understand how technology divorces life from warmth, closeness and compassion. Montag and Clarisse are most

susceptible to this seemingly imperceptible sense of existential dread. The posthumanist condition of man, therefore, finds a stirring portrayal in science fiction works like *Fahrenheit 451*. An automated future like the one projected in this novel is an example of the freedom posthumanism allows writers to uncover how scientific developments can be an anathema to a spiritually fructifying existence. The genre of science fiction meticulously fuses popular culture with high art to produce works that qualify as dystopian. In Bradbury's work, we see a profuse use of Mechanical Hounds, 3D interactive televisions, fireproof houses. All the fantastical elements are brought to life to an unimaginable degree. This overarching fear of a nuclear war compounds the bleakness of the setting. Before the world wars, the genre of science fiction was not fully tapped into and was only used to be a part of pulp magazines. Later, when the world had witnessed the wrath of atomic bomb, a drastic boom in the printing and publishing of science fiction granted it the status of mainstream literature. *Fahrenheit 451* addresses ins and outs of the postmodern condition. Through Montag's journey of self-discovery, Bradbury harps on the importance of challenging the ethos of a socio-political construct and not conforming to the ideas imposed upon a population. Montag arrives at an epiphany that the basis of his profession is fallacious and that he needs to preserve the books if he seeks his own salvation. While burning books at the old woman's house, Montag tells himself that "You weren't hurting anyone, you were hurting only things...there was nothing to tease your conscience later" (Bradbury, p. 17). We see how Montag tries to navigate through his thoughts as he feels torn between what he does and what he ought to do. His conflicted identity stems from his inability to act on his misgivings. Clarisse and Faber jolt him to his senses and make him come to terms with the problematic nature of his profession and allow him to reevaluate his thoughts and actions. The use of irony and tacit humour not only engages readers but also drives home the message of the importance of using one's voice. The story is laced in irony wherein a firefighter meant to burn books realises his true purpose and renounces his job and started preserving the book instead. Understanding that books embody a whole different world within a few pages helps Montag learn their value. This acknowledgement brings about his transformation. It is bizarre, for both Montag and readers, to know that people are jailed for driving carefully and reading books. Violence and force are the tools deployed to maintain peace and balance. To Mildred's habit of keeping audio-seashells in her ears, Montag says, "Wasn't there an old joke about a wife who talked so much on the telephone that her desperate husband ran to the nearest store to call her to ask what was for dinner" (Bradbury, p. 20).

## Conclusion

This paper shows how Bradbury joins Orwell in his sharp diatribe of a totalitarian state. It also shows the workings of a posthumanist society wherein man stopped being the sine qua non of all existence. The rise of dystopia in literature is highlighted from the standpoint of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. With the burning of books in the novel, the knowledge they represented was also extinguished. The paper tries to deconstruct such symbols of oppressive forces at play and establish dystopia as the reality of the postmodernist milieu. It attributes the criminal end of humanism and the rise of dystopia to technological advancements and increasing surveillance of the hegemonically oppressed.

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