

ANALYSIS OF DYSTOPIAN ELEMENTS IN “THE WANTING SEED” BY ANTHONY BURGESS

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Abstract. This article explores dystopian elements in Anthony Burgess’s “The Wanting Seed”, emphasizing state control, the abolition of religion and the manipulation of social order. Burgess portrays a totalitarian regime where coercion, dehumanization and moral decay reveal the cyclical collapse and renewal of human civilization.

Keywords: Dystopia, totalitarianism, religion, state control, moral decay.

ENTONİ BERCESSİN “ARZULANAN TOXUM” ƏSƏRİNDƏ ANTIÜTOPIK ELEMENTLƏRİN TƏHLİLİ

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Xülasə. Məqalədə Entoni Bercessin “Arzulanan Toxum” romanındakı antiutopik elementləri araşdırılmış və dövlət nəzarətini, dinin ləğvi və sosial nizamın manipulyasiyasına diqqət yetirilmişdir. Bercessin yaratdığı totalitar rejimdə məcburiyyət, insanlığa yadlaşma və mənəvi tənəzzül sivilizasiyanın dövrü süqutunu və yenilənməsini nümayiş etdirir.

Açar sözlər: Antiutopiya, totalitarizm, din, dövlət nəzarəti, mənəvi tənəzzül.

1. Introduction

Literature serves as a powerful mirror reflecting a society’s modes of thought, fears, aspirations and projections of the future. In the second half of the twentieth century, rapidly evolving political, economic and social dynamics compelled writers to seek new modes of expression, contributing to the rise of dystopian literature as a prominent genre. Works within this genre present possible future scenarios filled with irony, satire and philosophical reflection, encouraging readers to think critically. One of the prominent figures in 20th century English literature Anthony Burgess has made a distinctive contribution in this area. His dystopian novel “The Wanting Seed” critically examines the socio-political crises brought about by overpopulation through a sharply satirical lens and raises profound questions about the future of human civilization [1, p.35]. The novel explores how various forms of totalitarianism, ranging from liberal democracy to authoritarian dictatorship, exert control over individual life and morality. Burgess presents not only a critique of political systems but also a conceptual framework in which history unfolds cyclically - a theory often referred to as the *cyclical theory of history*. According to this vision, society transitions through three primary phases, Pelagian, Interphase and Augustinian, each representing shifts in attitudes toward human nature, governance and social order. In this sense, “The Wanting Seed” is not merely a dystopian narrative but also a philosophical inquiry into human nature and the structural dynamics of society [4].

In his autobiography, Anthony Burgess writes that “The Wanting Seed” was based on “a subject I had carried in my head for a long time”- namely, the problem of rapid population growth [2, p.33]. In his memoirs, the author identifies two primary sources of inspiration for the creation of the novel: Thomas Malthus` s demographic theories and his personal experiences while living in the East. Although the events of the novel take place in a future England, Burgess reflects that perhaps he should have chosen a more convincing setting such as Calcutta or Bombay to better emphasize the themes of the novel. In constructing his dystopian model of England, Burgess combines “the famine of Africa with the legal family planning of China”, drawing directly on the real-world conditions of developing countries [2, p.33]. He further notes that, during the time of writing “The Wanting Seed”, he was simultaneously working on a scholarly article about Thomas Malthus for an American journal [2, p.33]. In his seminal work “An Essay on the Principle of Population” (1798), Malthus famously predicted that population growth, if left unchecked, would inevitably outpace food production and could only be controlled through mechanisms he termed “Malthusian checks” - namely, war, famine or moral restraint (Thomas Malthus). Each of these mechanisms finds expression in “The Wanting Seed”: first through the government` s draconian population control policies, then through widespread famine and finally through an artificially orchestrated war designed to curb demographic growth. These parallels suggest that Burgess was deeply influenced by Malthusian economic theory and that “The Wanting Seed” represents a fictional extrapolation of those ideas into a future society shaped by overpopulation, authoritarian control and social decay.

It is clearly evident that Burgess was inspired by other dystopian works. Huxley` s “Brave New World Revisited”, in which he warns of the potential dangers posed by population growth, encouraged Burgess to make this theme a central focus in his novel “The Wanting Seed”. Furthermore, the dystopian society depicted in “The Wanting Seed” differs significantly from Orwell` s society, which is governed by fear. Rather than portraying a stable and unchanging regime, Burgess presents a cyclical transformation characterized by the decline of one system and the emergence of another. In this respect, his dystopia is not static but dynamic- that is, it possesses a structure that is constantly evolving and renewing itself. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the fictional world created by Burgess and Orwell` s world cannot be denied- particularly in the portrayal of global powers, where this parallel becomes especially noticeable. At the same time, Burgess explicitly acknowledges that the theory of cyclical governmental change presented in the novel “was conceived as a response to Orwell” [2, p.33].

2. Individual freedom

The first dystopian element to be discussed is the restriction of individual freedom. This is most clearly manifested in the state` s policies regarding population control. In an effort to reduce population growth, the government implements a range of strategies. One such policy

involves limiting citizens' right to have children. Individuals are permitted to have only one child- the ideal, however, is to have none at all. Having multiple children is portrayed as a phenomenon associated exclusively with the lower classes of society. After Beatrice- Joanna's only son Roger dies, she is advised to come to terms with reality: "You've had your recommended ration. No more motherhood for you. Try to stop feeling like a mother" [3, p.5]. Due to overpopulation, the state places little value on the lives of its citizens- for instance, Roger's inability to receive timely medical treatment, ultimately resulting in his death as though he were a disposable individual, serves as a clear illustration of this disregard. It means that in an overpopulated world the value of human life has simply been lost. The state prefers the death of individuals over the survival of those suffering from hunger. This attitude explains the government's negligence in providing medical care to the population [4].

3. Homosexuality

The second strategy implemented by the state is the official promotion of homosexuality and voluntary sterilization. Citizens are evaluated based on their sexual orientation and being homosexual or undergoing sterilization offers them greater opportunities for upward social mobility and career advancement. To this end, the government has established an institution called the "Homo Institute", where "night classes" are held [3, p.6] - presumably as a means of disseminating state propaganda. The explicit preference given to homosexuals over heterosexuals hinders Tristram's professional advancement. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that this policy is fraught with significant flaws. Some citizens exploit the system by falsely claiming to be homosexual in order to benefit from the advantages it affords. The most prominent example of this is Tristram's brother Derek, who fabricates a homosexual identity to secure a high-ranking position within the Ministry of Infertility.

Ultimately, these policies prove to be neither as the state requires nor sufficiently reinforced. In particular, religious individuals and members of the lower social classes disregard the government's recommendations and choose to have children. The ongoing population growth inevitably leads to the intensification of the regime, resulting in further restrictions on individual freedom. A formal shift in state policy becomes evident in Chapter Thirteen, where the Prime Minister addresses the nation via public television to announce the transformation of the regime. He declares that repressive measures will be implemented to curb population growth and proclaims a "war against irresponsibility" [3, p.53] - a campaign aimed at punishing noncompliant citizens who defy state laws. Burgess's depiction of the Prime Minister's speech carries a deeply satirical tone and is primarily aimed at critiquing the political rhetoric commonly employed during artificially constructed periods of crisis. The speech mimics the formulaic and vacuous expressions frequently used by political leaders; clichéd phrases such as "tighten your belts" and "stand united" [3, p.53] serve as clear examples. These expressions, stripped of their meaning through excessive use, have become instruments of state propaganda. Their function is to generate artificial solidarity and obedience among citizens, while offering

no concrete solutions to real problems. Moreover, the manipulative intent behind the speech is clearly evident. Citizens are portrayed as untrustworthy and irresponsible individuals, thus casting doubt on their capacity for autonomous decision-making and framing strict state control as a necessary measure undertaken “for their own good”. This approach enables the justification of repressive measures under the guise of benevolence, effectively masking authoritarianism with the illusion of collective welfare. Through this satirical portrayal, Burgess exposes how political language can be instrumentalized to curtail individual freedom, while simultaneously legitimizing such restrictions by constructing the illusion of public interest. Furthermore, the restriction of freedom of speech and criticism is emphasized. Citizens are unable to openly express their dissatisfaction or share their views on the system. Dissent against the regime is silenced and the state is presented as an unquestionable authority. This leads to the erosion of public discourse and the standardization of thought under totalitarian control. Ultimately, the portrayal of disobedience as punishable by “death” reveals the brutal and inhumane nature of the political regime. These punitive measures, justified under the pretext of ensuring national security and stability, in reality serve to instill fear among citizens and enforce absolute obedience [4].

4. Coercive forces

Another identifiable anti-utopian element in the novel is the role of coercive forces that support the existence of the state and reinforce its policies. At the beginning of the novel, during a period when the state is more liberal, the police do not play a decisive role in its functioning. However, as the narrative progresses, the significance of the regime’s coercive apparatus gradually increases. The main police force is represented by the “grey boys”, described as individuals “dressed in grey uniforms and armed with truncheons”. The new police officers are primarily recruited from among criminals and the unemployed. Tristram explains the emergence of this new police force in the streets as follows: “It was the end of the Pelphase; people were going to be made good” [3, p.36]. The liberal society is excessively weak in regulation and some citizens even call for the implementation of stronger controls. As the story develops, the number of police officers patrolling the streets increases. The growing police presence in public spaces serves as a dark omen indicating the imminent end of the liberal era and foreshadows the emergence of a harsher, more rigid regime. Overall, Burgess’s portrayal of the police forces in the novel aligns with a perspective that views the police as an instrument employed by the state to secure the obedience of its citizens. The increasing number of police officers on the streets not only signifies the regime’s shift toward totalitarianism but also becomes a dark omen indicating the moral and social decline of society [4]. Based on Burgess’s depiction, it may be argued that he conceives of the police as an inherently violent institution—that is, as a weapon the government can wield against its citizens. Furthermore, the police characters he creates, particularly the “grey boys”, abuse their authority and perpetrate acts of

terror against innocent individuals. The representations of police brutality in the novel undoubtedly make a significant contribution to the anti-utopian atmosphere constructed by Burgess; citizens live in fear of the police and attempt by all possible means to avoid any confrontation with them.

5. Religion

One of the central anti-utopian elements in Burgess's novel is the state's treatment of religion. The government effectively abolishes religious belief and designates God as an "outdated concept" [3, p.44]. In place of the divine, the state introduces a parodic and fabricated figure, "Mr. Livedog", a caricature intended to ridicule and trivialize faith. Even the very word "God" is subverted and reversed into "Dog", symbolizing the regime's attempt to degrade the sacred through linguistic manipulation. The Prime Minister articulates this policy as follows: "God is the enemy. We have conquered God and tamed him into a comic cartoon character for children to laugh at. Mr. Livedog. God was dangerous idea in people's minds. We have rid the civilized world of that idea" [3, p.113]. Despite the state's official prohibition of religion, some individuals continue to believe in God in secret. At the beginning of the novel, when the regime has not yet assumed a fully despotic or totalitarian form, religious believers are not subjected to overt persecution. However, as state policies become increasingly rigid and authoritarian, the clergy begin to face systematic oppression and imprisonment. These arrests by the grey-uniformed state agents, the so-called "greyboys", vividly illustrates the regime's totalitarian nature, in which dissenting thought is criminalized.

The state's policy toward religion begins to change gradually after famine engulfs the world. People start to interpret the famine as divine punishment for humanity's life in defiance of natural order and this sense of fear prompts many to return to religious faith. The demand for religious rituals steadily increases. Even the government, driven to despair, attempts to pray: "I am instructed by the Home Secretary to read out the following, which is being read out also at this moment in the schools, hospitals, offices and factories of the kingdom. It is a prayer devised by the Ministry of Propaganda" [3, p.119]. However, this prayer is not addressed to God but to "the powers of evil", imploring them to cease devastating the nation [3, p.120]. The disease that causes the famine lies beyond the control of the state and as a result, the formerly atheistic government turns to God as a last resort. This ideological reversal, which occurs shortly before the complete collapse of the state, leads to the release of imprisoned priests and the organization of public religious ceremonies throughout the streets. By the end of the novel, religious rituals and acts of worship have become the new social norm. For instance, daily religious services are held within the army. Society thus turns away from atheism and reembraces faith. More significantly, the return to religious belief and to the natural process of procreation appears to deliver humanity from starvation, as food begins, quite unexpectedly, to grow once again.

Conclusion. Anthony Burgess's "The Wanting Seed" powerfully embodies the defining features of dystopian fiction through its portrayal of overpopulation, state control and the cyclical corruption of human society. Burgess constructs a world where government intrusion extends into the most intimate aspects of life - sexuality, reproduction and belief- revealing the dangers of ideological extremes and blind faith in progress. The novel's grim satire underscores how attempts to perfect society inevitably expose the flaws of human nature and the fragility of moral order. By blending dark humor with social critique, Burgess not only warns of a dehumanized future but also forces readers to confront the enduring patterns of oppression, conformity and moral decay that persist in every age. Ultimately, "The Wanting Seed" stands as a cautionary reflection on humanity's tendency to repeat its own dystopian cycles.

References

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