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MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE MEMORY POLICE* AND *THE MAZE RUNNER*

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the importance that memory and identity play in contemporary dystopian fiction, with a particular emphasis on Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* as the two primary works of study. Through a comparative analysis of the two novels, this study examines how memory and identity are constructed and manipulated in these dystopian societies. Drawing upon theories of memory and identity formation, this paper analyzes how both novels use these concepts to explore themes of resistance, survival, and power. The study presents evidence to support the notion that memory and identity play a significant role in both the protagonist's ability to endure in these authoritarian regimes and their capacity to fight back against them. The erasure of memories in *'The Memory Police'* results in the loss of identity and agency, whereas in *'The Maze Runner,'* the loss of memory enables the governing body to manipulate identities and exert more control over its subjects. In addition to that, the study delves into topics such as traumatic experiences, overcoming adversity, and the influence that one's memories have on their sense of identity. Ultimately, this study provides new insights into the ways in which contemporary dystopian fiction uses memory and identity to engage with pressing social and political issues, and underscores the importance of memory and identity in shaping individual and collective resistance.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Dystopian Fiction, Resistance, Survival, Yoko Ogawa, James Dashner.

Introduction

Yoko Ogawa is a celebrated Japanese author whose literary works have captured the attention of readers across the globe. Born in Okayama, Japan, in 1962, Ogawa began her writing career as a freelance writer while studying at Waseda University. Her debut novel, *The Breaking of a Wave*, was published in 1988, and she has since written numerous acclaimed works of fiction, including *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, *The Diving Pool*, and *Revenge*. Ogawa's writing is characterized by its

quiet intensity and nuanced explorations of human emotion, often delving into themes of memory, loss, and the nature of identity. Her prose is spare and precise, yet rich with sensory detail, creating an immersive and emotionally resonant reading experience. Over the course of her career, Yoko Ogawa has established herself as a literary force to be reckoned with, and her works continue to captivate and inspire readers around the world. Yoko Ogawa's talent for crafting intricate and emotionally charged narratives is on full display in

her novel, *The Memory Police*, a dystopian work of fiction that explores the nature of memory, identity, and the power of authoritarianism.

James Dashner is a prolific American author who has gained widespread recognition for his contribution to the speculative fiction and young adult genre. Born in Georgia in 1972, Dashner started writing at a young age, and his early passion for storytelling led him to pursue a career as an author. His works are known for their fast-paced, action-packed plots, and unique twists that keep readers on the edge of their seats. Dashner's most famous series, *The Maze Runner*, has sold millions of copies worldwide and has been adapted into a successful film franchise. James Dashner's novel, *The Maze Runner*, has established him as a prominent figure in the world of dystopian fiction. He is also the author of several other popular young adult series, including *The Mortality Doctrine* and *The 13th Reality*. Dashner's success as a writer can be attributed to his ability to create compelling characters and immersive worlds that resonate with readers of all ages. Dashner's ability to create a vivid, detailed world and complex, relatable characters has cemented his status as a leading voice in contemporary young adult literature. The novel, *The Maze Runner*, is set in a post-apocalyptic world, follows a group of teenagers as they navigate through a dangerous maze in a bid to uncover the truth about their existence. Dashner's skillful portrayal of a world in chaos, where the government has lost control and society has collapsed, taps into our collective anxieties about the future. The novel deals with themes of survival, sacrifice, and the consequences of blind trust.

The term "utopia", which is of Greek origin and means "not in place" or "nowhere", was first used in 1516 by Thomas More, the most famous author of utopian fiction, in his book of the same name *Utopia*. Utopia is a description of perfect civilizations, which are typically moral or political in goal, and the book provides a picture of a faraway nation called Utopia that is arranged on the basis of entirely rational ideas. More mocks the irrationality and folly of inherited presumptions about money and private property in his work *Utopia*. More's work was written in the early 18th century. He coined the

term "utopian fiction" and laid the groundwork for its structure, which led to the popularization of the notion of utopia and its subsequent expansion beyond the realm of utopian fiction into the realms of politics, religion, popular culture, and every other area of academic inquiry. Utopia is a hypothetical, idealized world, that is both perfect and delightful, whereas the term "dystopia" describes a condition of unhappiness coupled with a deteriorated way of life and illustrates a civilization of the future that is influenced by modern practices. It should serve as a cautionary tale about the disastrous repercussions of leading a deplorable life. Dystopia is "the idea of utopia gone wrong," according to Vieira in her article titled "The Concept of Utopia" (16). A dystopia is a fictional civilization that is the opposite of a utopia and features repressive social control, much like an authoritarian or totalitarian government. It exemplifies everything that is antithetical to the concept of utopia, which refers to an imperfect community or civilization. The dystopian vision looks for things that could go wrong, making the dystopia seem destructive rather than creative, whereas the utopian approach believes in dreaming and encouraging human creativity.

Although the dystopian stories take place in the future; nevertheless, they often contain elements that are similar to cultures that exist today, such as showing people living in dread and persecution. Authors of utopian and dystopian fiction frequently use their unique and cutting-edge concepts to critique particular features of our world in a perilous state, and thus acts as a warning to the advancement of the current civilization turning into a calamity in any form. The perils associated with rejecting or standing against the autocratic government are made clear to readers through dystopian literature. Such stories often include elements like constant surveillance, oppressive governing structures, a lack of freedom, and forced conformity. This paper deals with the themes of identity and memory in dystopian societies portrayed in the novels *The Memory Police* and *The Maze Runner*.

The different forms of disciplinary control that a government exercises over the body and mind of its subjects are frequently portrayed in dystopian

literature. This control is used to manipulate the human body and mind in order to attain supreme authority in dystopian societies. In this study, a comparative analysis of two dystopian novels is presented. The purpose of the analysis is to demonstrate how the governments depicted in the novels attempt to develop disciplined bodies and minds through the employment of a carefully regulated routine, defined social functions, and continual surveillance. In each of these books, the authorities in charge of governing tried to strip people of the two things that are most valuable to them and absolutely necessary for their survival. "Memory, both individual and collective, has always played an extensive part in sustaining the core of the society as well as the unity of the society as a whole. Memory has always served as the binder, the common denominator that "glued together" a nation. This means that memory has always played an important role in keeping the society together. This idea is closely tied to that of identity, which justifies its importance that much in the areas deprived of these two structurally intrinsic components of the individual, regarded as an entity that defines himself/ herself via its "adherence" to particular values. Moreover, the close relationship between these two ideas justifies the importance of this idea in general. However, human identity cannot exist apart from or in the absence of memory since memory serves as a mechanism that ensures continuity (Pierre Nora). The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of memory and identity in an effort to understand how they can be exploited in order to reshape society in accordance with the requirements of a totalitarian government. This paper discusses two concepts that have been extensively explored in relation to dystopian fiction that depicts the world as a totalitarian universe, among which I listed *The Memory Police* and *The Blade Runner*.

Discussion

In her book, *The Memory Police*, Ogawa imagines a society in which a ruthless government routinely erases memories and those who are unable to forget suffer terrible repercussions. As she makes her way through this nightmare setting, the young novelist who is the protagonist of

the story struggles to keep her memories intact and to keep her sense of self. Ogawa's precise and lyrical style captures the weird, surreal tone of this cosmos, yet it also explores challenging issues about the connection between memory and individual identity. *The Memory Police*, a dystopian novel, that is both unsettling and thought-provoking has established Yoko Ogawa as one of the most perceptive and talented authors of our time. On the nameless island where the story takes place, the totalitarian Memory Police, a violent government organisation entrusted with keeping order by controlling the collective memory of the populace, erases memories in a ruthless manner. Their mission is to maintain order by monitoring and controlling the memories of the population. The protagonist, a young novelist, is one of the few people who can save their memories as their friends and loved ones lose track of the world by the events taking place around them. She is also one of the few people who can save the world. As the Memory Police begin their hunt for people who are unable to forget, the protagonist finds herself in a race against the passage of time to maintain her memories and defend her sense of self. The issue of memory, in all of its intricacies, is depicted by Ogawa over the entirety of the novel. On the one hand, memory is portrayed as an essential component of individual identity, and it is suggested that when one loses their memories, they also lose a part of themselves. This sense of identity loss is strongly represented through the depiction of characters who forget their own names, prior experiences, and even their loved ones, becoming mere shells of their former selves in the process. On the other side, memory is shown to be a cause of misery and suffering in the story, as the protagonist is tormented by memories of her past and the happenings that led to the establishment of the Memory Police. But despite all that she is able to save her memories even while many around her begin to forget, which provides her with a unique viewpoint on the impact that erasure of memory has on personal identity. This ability of the protagonist to keep her memories also enables her to maintain her sense of self and fight the attempts of the Memory Police to erase her identity. As the story goes on, the protagonist becomes increasingly

determined to resist the Memory Police and preserve her memories. She develops a close relationship with an elderly man who is also able to recall, and together, the two of them establish a secret haven where they are able to protect their memories and defy the rule of the regime. This act of resistance is not only a way of preserving personal identity, but it is also an act of rebellion against the regime's attempt to control and manipulate the collective memory of the populace.

The nature of authoritarianism and the ways in which it can shape and govern individual and community identity are also explored in the novel. The erasing of memory by The Memory Police serves as a chilling metaphor for the ways in which totalitarian regimes aim to manipulate and control their subjects, while simultaneously underlining the role of memory in resisting such control. Through the exploration of these two themes the novel reveals the ways in which memory and personal identity are interwoven and also gives a warning about the perils of authoritarianism and the necessity of resisting its encroachment on human freedom and autonomy. The novel is a great example for readers to know how memory and identity play a vital role in the resistance that the protagonist displays against the totalitarian system. The protagonist is able to fend against the regime's attempts to eradicate individual identity by holding onto her memories and upholding her sense of self. She is also able to establish her autonomy in the face of oppressive rule.

James Dashner's novel, *The Maze Runner*, is set in a dystopian world about a group of teenage boys who are trapped inside a mysterious maze with no memory of their past. Thomas, the main character, awakens in what is known as the Glade, which is a huge open place that is encircled by walls that serve to isolate them from the maze. The boys who live in the Glade have created a self-sufficient community where everyone has a role to play. However, their lives are thrown into disarray when a new boy arrives, which sets in motion a chain of events that reveal the sinister nature of their incarceration. The theme of loss of identity is a central aspect of the novel and it focusses heavily on the concept of characters losing their identities at

various points in the story. The boys have no memory of their previous lives, and the only way for them to regain their memories is to find a way out of the maze they are in. The fact that they have no idea who they are or how they got to be in the Glade is causing them discomfort and frustration. As the events of the novel unfold, it becomes apparent that their identities have been deliberately erased, and the boys are part of a cruel experiment designed to test their instincts for survival. The theme of memory is explored in the novel as well. Thomas begins to have vivid dreams of a past life, the details of which he is having trouble putting together. As he dives more into the enigma of the maze, he gradually comes to the realization that his dreams contain the key to unlocking both his identity and the mystery that lies behind their incarceration. The importance of memory is emphasized throughout the novel, as is the impact that losing one's memory can have on a person's sense of who they are as an individual. The governing body, known as WICKED, is able to manipulate identities and exert more influence over its subjects thanks in large part to the crucial role that the loss of memory plays in this process. WICKED is able to provide its members with a fresh start by erasing the memories of their subjects, so providing a blank slate on which the members can forge new identities and personalities. By doing this, they are able to shape the boys into whatever it is that they envision for them in the future, whether it be soldiers, scientists, or something totally else. The boys' memory loss also instills them with a sense of anxiety and disorientation, making them more susceptible to manipulation. They have no idea who they are, where they came from, or what their role in the world is because they have lost all of their memories. Due to the fact that they do not have any other point of reference, this makes it more likely for them to comply with the rules and norms established by WICKED.

It becomes evident as the plot develops that WICKED's ultimate purpose is to discover a remedy for a fatal virus that has wiped out the majority of the world's population. The boys are a part of an experiment meant to evaluate alternative treatments. The boys are kept in the dark about the

true purpose of the experiment, though, by the loss of memory. Since the boys are in the dark about what is actually happening, WICKED is able to maintain a level of control over them by withholding information. The story presented in the novel is compelling that addresses themes of memory loss and loss of identity in a dystopian world. Dashner's vivid descriptions of the maze and the boys' struggle to survive create a sense of tension and urgency that keeps the reader engaged until the very end.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that the themes of memory and identity play an important role in dystopian societies depicted in the novels *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa and *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner. Both novels describe how memory and identity can be constructed and manipulated by those in power to control their subjects and maintain their grip on society. In *The Memory Police*, the government has the power to control memory and the ability to make things disappear from the minds of citizens. The Memory Police are responsible for enforcing this control, and those who resist the memory manipulation are subject to punishment for their disobedience. As a result, the citizens' identities are constructed and manipulated based on the memories that the government allows them to have. The protagonist of the novel is a writer who resists the Memory Police's attempts to control her and retains her memories of the things that have disappeared. She is forced to hide her memories and identity from the government, fearing punishment for her nonconformity. This demonstrates how the government's manipulation of memory can lead to the suppression of individuality and the loss of personal identity. The governing body, WICKED, similarly erases the subjects' memory in *The Maze Runner* as part of an experiment to find a cure for a fatal infection. Memory loss makes the victims more vulnerable to control and manipulation since it enables WICKED to construct and manipulate their identities as they see appropriate. Because they lack any other context, the subjects are forced to comply without question with the rules and regulations established by WICKED. Later on the subjects begin to regain their memories and realise that WICKED

has been playing with their identities. As a result of the subjects coming to this realization, a rebellion against the government ensues as they fight to restore their unique identities and defy WICKED's rule.

In both novels, the manipulation of memory and identity is a tool used by those in power to maintain control over their subjects. The suppression of individuality and personal identity is a common theme in dystopian societies, where the government seeks to create a homogenous and obedient people. However, in each of the aforementioned novels, there is a resistance to this manipulation of memory and identity. The protagonists of both novels rebel against the oppressive regimes that seek to control them and reclaim their personal identities. This rebellion illustrates the importance of personal identity and individuality in the face of government oppression. By comparing these two novels, the study highlighted the different ways in which memory and identity are constructed and manipulated, and the effects on individuals and society. In conclusion, the novels *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa and *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner both explore the themes of memory and identity in dystopian societies. While the methods of control and manipulation differ between the two novels, the effects on the individual are similar: the suppression of individuality and personal identity.

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