FEAR, ANXIETY, SURVEILLANCE IN DYSTOPIAS REVISITED: A RETROTOPIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The term dystopia has witnessed several new meanings including the one associated with the literature of the pandemic. These writings describe the scenes of fear, anxiety, and surveillance in flu-affected societies. This paper makes a qualitative study of a few selected novels published during 2000-2020 to understand the retrotopian perspective. No research has been carried out on pandemic dystopias with the retrotopian perspective. The dystopias selected for this study includes Whitehead's *Zone One (2011); Mandel's Station Eleven (2014); DeLillo's The Silence (2020)* and most recent May's *Lockdown (2020)*. The findings reveal that each novelist preferred the retrotopian perspective, projecting an ideal past as the more plausible solution to their traumatic present. The protagonist in each of these four novels suffers traumas and witnesses the apocalypse both internally and externally, but each is engaged in a quest into the past and searching for the lost identity. This study fills up the research gap that currently exists in the field of dystopian literature related to the past or retrotopian studies. It would also open new avenues to explore the possibility of experimenting into devising a new theory or a genre of retrotopia.

Contribution/ Originality: This paper is one of the first studies to examine the retrotopian approach of dystopian novels in the post-pandemic era. It also contributes to experimenting into devising a new genre of retrotopia within the utopian or speculative fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dystopian novels in the early part of the 20th century mostly dealt with state-sponsored totalitarianism, stringent bureaucratization, surveillance and regimentation and stood as grim portrayals about future and fictionalized representation of the present fears (Baccolini & Tom, 2003). Tate (2017) rightly calls them 'contemporary narratives haunted by dreams of a future that is a place of ruin'. They were initially planned as projections of the misuse of political and economic power and scientific knowledge. A few of them resorted to unethical practices or lack of responsibility shown by biologists, space scientists and political leaders. The utopian concept of achieving human happiness was seen restricted to its ideal state only. The question raised in most of these dystopias was whether we have lost faith in utopias and should now start believing in dystopia intermittently happening as a result of one or other flaws of the human race. Another question raised was whether readers should draw a connection between the dystopian worlds portrayed and the events happening in actual real world.

However, in most recent times, during the last two decades, the term dystopia has been redefined and new meanings are attempted (Abdullah & Nifal, 2021). For instance, Shange (2019) in her dissertation submitted to

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Pennsylvania university, rediscovered dystopia and equated them as progressive dystopias. According to her, progressive dystopias echoed the wrath of the Black communities, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, and racial discrimination. While early dystopias described the totalitarian conflicts, progressive dystopias depicted the conflict between the racialized minorities and more privileged communities. The word progressive represents the positivism, so Shange (2019) optimistically portrayed a "multiracial coalition" to bring a "democratic social change" (xi). Her work symbolizes, in her own words, "carceral progressivism", which she conceptualized as a kind of "liberal" state machinery working towards amalgamating socially the Blacks with the whites, or at least trying to devise methods to ameliorate the white supremacy over the anti-Black racism, devising the concept of multiracial coalition. What Shange (2019) is attempting to obtain from her research was how to negate the dystopian element in the present world and attempt to rebuild with coalition, social democracy, welfare governance, efficient bureaucracy and absence of colonial and racial discrimination. It is thus an attempt to return to a utopia-like world where idealism and sanity prevail, to revive the humanitarian ideology which seem to have succumbed to war and politics of the modern times.

Another kind of writings recently, which the term dystopian is associated with, is the literature of the pandemic, of the killer-virus, which forces the human race to collapse infecting the entire human population on the earth. Some of the prominent works include Whitehead (2011); Mandel (2014); DeLillo (2020) and most recent (May, 2020) on influenza pandemic (published 2021, written in 2005). Each of these dystopias describes fictionally how human flaws can bring disaster to the entire humanity. Each of these novels is a dehumanized depiction of a flu-infected human race suffering from a deadly virus. These narratives offer scenes of fear, anxiety, and surveillance that one had witnessed in contemporary dystopias.

As in most dystopias, these works too explained how to make this earth habitable once again by fighting the virus. These dystopian narratives were not given much importance until the COVID-19 did really happen and construed most of those fears and anxieties as plausible, hitherto seen only as fictitious and fallacious (Eringfeld, 2021; McMillan, 2022). The question arises that when any literary work makes such dystopian portrayals, should readers draw a connection between the dystopian world of the novel and the events happening in actual real world. It also makes readers quizzical about the causes of those traumatic events and whether any containment measures exist to resolve the threats.

This idea is consistent with the views of Margaret Atwood, who has written quite a few modern dystopias highlighting the causes why civilizations collapse. Commenting on COVID-19 and lockdown, she says, "our locked-down world might be an unpleasant, frightening, disagreeable place you don't want to be", but it is not "dystopian". Her argument is that since a dystopia is a deliberately "arranged" society by a totalitarian regime, the current pandemic was not "arranged" and it is not "a deliberate totalitarianism". It is "an emergency crisis" and therefore not a dystopia. This is a strong support to the argument of the current research that aims to look for the positivism in the new and modern dystopias, and to relate them with the real and actual events, thus finding ways and means to stop calling them dystopias but products of man's callous steps and abuse of scientific knowledge.

The current research is an attempt to revisit a few 'new' and 'modern' dystopias of the 21st century, specifically to highlight the retrotopian perspective, or how to revive the past which is being systematically abandoned. For the purpose of revisiting these dystopias, it was essential to find out how the hopes of humanity can be kept alive. The retrotopian vision was seen as the answer. The Latin prefix "*retro*" means "backwards" or "in the past time," is added to "utopia" meaning an ideal society. The rationale behind using the retrotopian perspective in this research was to emphasize upon the need to build a vision, not about a future-to-be-created, but revive the past that has been abandoned, a past that was stable, trustworthy and glorious. This projection could be called retrotopian, a term which is retrospectively applicable on all social, political, cultural, scientific and economic practices (Clegg, 2018). Bauman (2018) asserted that "Retrotopian ….is the outcome of a dramatic U-turn in the public mindset, [diverting] public from un-trustworthy future to …. vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so

trustworthiness". A very few writings on dystopian novels have attempted an empirical analysis in retrotopian perspective; rather they have dealt with the negation of the past. This has led to a big research gap that needs to be filled up by attempting a study of a literary text, specifically a new and modern dystopia. This study proposes to make an empirical and generic analysis of selected diasporic literary works of the last two decades (2000 -2020), specifically those that dealt will flu pandemic and investigate how these narratives could be extrapolated in the present; and how their projections could implicate in building and establishing a new world. The following four novels were selected for this study: Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011); Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014); DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) and May's *Lockdown* (2020).

1.1. Problem Statement and Conceptual Framework

The dystopias are very grim portrayals about future. they are fictionalized representation of the present fears (Baccolini & Tom, 2003; Booker, 1994). They are initially planned as projections of the misuse of political and economic power and scientific knowledge. A few of them relate to the unethical practices or lack of responsibility shown by biologists, space scientists and political leaders. The utopian concept of achieving human happiness has remained in its ideal state only. The question is whether we have lost faith in utopias and should now start believing in dystopia intermittently happening as a result of one or other flaws of the human race. A question also arises whether readers should draw a connection between the dystopian worlds portrayed and the events happening in actual real world. Secondly, it should also be investigated whether the containment and surveillance measures devised to combat and eliminate the flu pandemic in those novels could be considered positivistic, philanthropic and whether they succeeded in resolving the COVID related issues that had put the entire humanity in fear and anxiety. The main objective of this research was to perform a retrotopian analysis of the selected dystopias portraying a dehumanized world caused by a virus-generated pandemic, specifically focusing on Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011); Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014); DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) and May's *Lockdown* (2020).

The following objectives were set out for the study:

1. To investigate how far the new and modern pandemic dystopias are projections of real and plausible events, that have either happened already or are imminent to happen, if adequate measures are not adopted.
2. To identify the retrotopian perspective in these fictional dystopian narratives and retrieve the elements of positivism I them.

Based on these objectives, a conceptual framework was designed for this study. Figure 1 illustrates how the retrotopian perspective was built, contrary to the utopian (ideal) and dystopian (negative), suggesting a longing for the past. Besides, the retrotopian perspective also marks a paradigm shift from the utopian world to a dystopian world. While practicing the retrotopian perspective, each of the selected novels juxtaposes between present and past.
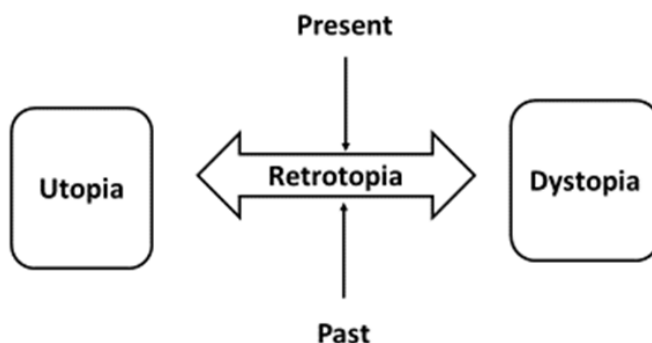

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

The retrotopian perspective has been strongly felt in most modern speculative fiction, and a need was felt to examine whether the retrotopian perspective can potentially become a generic experimentation or it is just a casual and fictional enterprise of the author's imagination. It is hoped that these study findings will expand the horizon of the research domain of dystopian literature and its ideology to include the theoretical underpinnings of the retrotopian elements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The dystopian novels present dehumanized psychological warfare, alienation and marginalization. They portray a world under political and economic repression exerted by the totalitarian states, and a post-apocalyptic world struggling to revive from nuclear war (Gomel, 2000). The Orwellian nightmare, the Kafkaesque's bizarre bureaucracy, and extra-terrestrial tales of Asimov and Arthur Clarke are a few examples which were seen as cautionary tales about a very grim future. However, with a lot of positivism spread by social media, scientific and philanthropic initiatives by the human race globally, most of these dystopian projections were either proven wrong or steered towards their logical conclusion (Bozóki, 2020; Bussière, 2020; Gomel, 2010; Stock, 2018).

The world is once again flooded with 'new' and 'modern' dystopias, but this time the theme is pandemic (Aldama, 2021; Callaghan, 2020). COVID -19 created a state of alienation, in the name of social distancing, and also exposed the flaws of our society. Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), for instance, blends literary element with the post-apocalyptic world, where a virus proved a big menace to the human civilization (O'Gorman & Eaglestone, 2019; Sollazzo, 2017). Kayışcı (2021) the virus has turned each infected human into a contagious cannibal zombie. Like, all other dystopias, this novel too ends with a rebuilding process where the survivors take up the mission to make the earth habitable once again. Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), takes readers backwards and forwards in time, stereotyping the time during a flu epidemic which has collapsed the whole human civilization (Alter, 2014; Cameron, 2014; Huntley, 2014). The author questions how could humanity not prevent the pandemic from wiping out a large chunk of population on this planet. The survivors of the pandemic resort to art and aesthetics (artefacts of the past) to regain the lost civilization.

Likewise, DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) is a dystopian narrative which delves into man's struggle to survive a crisis caused by a virus that almost obliterated the whole human race. It ends with the hope still lying in man's goodness. The book received mixed reaction from the media critics: Marcus (2020) of *Los Angeles Review of Books* finds the novella not a book, but a couple of "warm-up chapters" showing the reluctance of the writer to write a book. This hints that this book is about a world where there will be no plots, no stories," he further adds. *The New York Review of Books* finds the book though "poignant and terrible" but also artistically inferior, what Edward Said might have called ironical or Adorno as "catastrophes of art."

A most recently published novel, May's *Lockdown* (2020) is a dystopian novel set in London, which is portrayed as the center of a bird flu epidemic, which has necessitated a complete lockdown (Briggs, 2021). The book, submitted in 2005, was rejected by several publishers, calling it a very "scary narrative" and "unrealistic", however, the author claimed having done a lot of research to write this novel (Elassar, 2020). The question raised in this novel is what if this pandemic started in London and the whole city is completely locked down. Peter May writes in the Preface of the book, "British editors at the time thought my portrayal of London under siege by the invisible enemy of H5N1 [bird flu] was unrealistic and could never happen – in spite of the fact that all my research showed that, really, it could" (May, 2020). However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19, when May resubmitted the manuscript to the publisher, it was readily accepted.

When Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in the 16th century, he started the tradition of writing utopian narratives of ideal places, islands, remote locations ruled by a benevolent sovereign state with utmost humanitarian feelings. Later, in 19th and 20th centuries, scientific nightmares and totalitarian regimes took over the utopian tradition and a generic shift was seen to call such narratives as anti-utopias or dystopias. This was the evidence that we had lost

faith in utopias or their futuristic vision is so idealistic that it seems to be impossible to attain them. In the recent times, utopias have emerged again, but this time the vision is focused not on the future but on the past, not on an idealistic future-to-be-created but on an abandoned past, and such utopias could be called retrotopia.

The emergence of a retrotopia can be seen interwoven with the ever-widening gulf between the past and the future—the gulf between the already accomplished things that are part of the past and things to be accomplished in future. The retrotopian perspective was recently examined by Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), who identified that the said gulf has however remained widened as mankind has not been able to deliver the promises that future made, resulting in a disillusionment about technology, and with every idea that symbolizes growth in future (Bauman, 2018). A serious kind of mistrust is seen in the human ability to achieve the future aspirations. Hence, like utopian and the dystopian vision seen in the 18th and 19th centuries, in the works of HG wells, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and several sci-fi writers, the retrotopian vision is also created from the urge to rectify the failures of the present—not by a futuristic vision but by a renaissance, a resurrection of forgotten past. The past was seen as a potential and genuine reservoir of positive energy, with the ability to draw a "road-map" for a better world. The retrotopia was seen as a generic experiment in the tradition of utopia and dystopias as writers had lost all faith in the utopian concept of building an alternative society in the future, rather, they found it an easier path to turn to the past, buried in time but not yet dead.

Inspired by Bauman's treatise of retrotopia, there was another futuristic fiction with the same title *Retrotopia* (Greer, 2016). John Greer places this novel in the year 2065 when the post-civil war in the United States has fallen apart into small fragments, and new nations rival one another on economic and political issues. Amidst these small nations, wrecked by poverty, civil tensions, high-tech skyscrapers, and starving slums, there arises a small nation called Lakeland Republic in the Midwest America. It is a state isolated from the rest by closed frontiers and trade embargos. The new administrators do not talk about futuristic economics or speculative political or diplomatic adjustments, but seek directions from the past, from the history which once again is revived. The post-civil war republics of the United States aim to model themselves not as per the future aspirations but upon the past.

Both Bauman and Greer seem to be engrossed with nostalgia, recoiling themselves into an imagined past, deriving inspiration from the past to build a utopian yet achievable nation. In their new imagined world, things are better managed and organized, however, each flowing into a sort of liquid, malleable society that looks retrospectively backward into the past, modeling a future upon the past. The current study is an attempt to analyze the feasibility of adopting such a retrotopian perspective in solving the issues faced in the present.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted to carry out this research. The qualitative approach requires a descriptive and narrative rhetoric in order to find the answers to the 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 2011). Therefore, while finding answers to 'how' and 'why' questions, this study simultaneously focused on the events and themes of each novel sampled for this study. The non-probability, purposive sampling method was adopted to select the novels. The only criterion was that the selected novel must be written as a cautionary post-apocalyptic tale of a pandemic. Another advantage of a qualitative research method is that the researcher is able to see the events and themes in 'multiple contextual factors' (Creswell & Poth, 2007), with a constructivist approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and with participatory perspectives (Mertens, 2003). For this reason, it was easier to adopt varied and contextual critical strategies to analyze the retrotopian perspective in each text constructively. A close reading of the text further helped to make an in-depth study vertically as well as horizontally.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Zone One (Whitehead, 2011)

The novel *Zone One* is a third-person narrative where the protagonist Mark Spitz describes how the deadly plague is transforming humans into zombies, or "skels" and "stragglers". Once a healthy human is bitten by these zombies, s/he is also turned into a fellow skel like them, thus necessitating every healthy human being to "quarantine" or find a place where zombies cannot find the access. Mark Spitz "quarantines" a small area in Manhattan, described as Zone One, where he plans to restore healthy living conditions and inhabitate a zombie-free society. Interestingly, the retrotopian perspective surfaces in the novel when Mark recreates the life before the plague, through flashbacks, revisiting in his thoughts his school, work place and recreating the lost relationships, intermittently longing to change his present into a life one like his past.

However, Mark's past is not much significant as he had few friends and not too many societal acquaintances, which fills in him the emptiness. Still he wants to preserve those small memories, with the hope of resurrecting them one day, and falls reluctant to dive into flashback any longer since he realizes that if he lingers on the past, or clings too close to his past, he would end up dying or gets infected soon by the contagious plague. So, he decides to sweep the apocalyptic city by killing skels and contribute in rebuilding a plague-free, habitable place for human to live, which he calls Zone One. His longing for the past was seen to be the motivation to excel at his job as a sweeper. The excess use of flashbacks in the novel highlights the retrotopian perspective, suggesting how a constant reference to the past can help reconstruct the present and the future. Finally, Mark Spitz and his sweeper team succeeds in building a border wall that separates Zone One from the rest of zombie-ridden New York city.

Whitehead also conceives a government run by the bourgeois to fight the plague-affected cities. The task assigned to the new government is to optimize the survival of the humans, full of optimism. Refugee camps are built across the country, cleanup campaigns start in Manhattan and surrounding places to resettle the survivors. These survivors are trained and equipped with sanitized weapons to kills skels in order to stay alive. The novel ends by showing gratitude to broader humanitarian institutions of the past like democracy, benign authoritative structures, and a reliable governance. Mark Spitz thus survives as a strong human among zombies with the apocalyptic warning that if these institutions are not rebuilt, the world is going to end soon.

4.2. Don DeLillo's 'The Silence' DeLillo (2020)

The novel *The Silence* is truly retrotopian right from the beginning as it projects a world that has witnessed the "Death" of technology, end of the digital age suggesting a return to a time that was more stable. DeLillo (2020) chose Albert Einstein's oft-quoted phrase to begin the novel: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." What Einstein feared in future was a nuclear war, which if took place, would end the whole world, taking humanity back to the Paleolithic period of stones and sticks.

The novel, *The Silence* (DeLillo, 2020), presents the post-plague world of 2022, after a catastrophic pandemic. The novel begins with a plane flying steadily for quite some time suddenly feels turbulence and starts losing altitude, all screens turn blank, and all signals get disconnected. On the ground, all cities face a disruption, with all phones and networks dead, laptops "lifeless" and technology "dead." Some call it a Chinese cyberwarfare, others "internet apocalypse" or an "extraterrestrial" attack. Symbolically, and in a more a retrotopian way, Martin who was lecturing on modern space and time, suddenly halts at the trinity of Einstein, Heisenberg and Gödel, and would not go further signifying "relativity, uncertainty, incompleteness" all together, while Max who was playing a game finds the machine reciting "Jesus, or good Christ." These incidents were interpreted as errors not only of quantum physics or technology failure, but also errors of time.

Everywhere there is apocalyptic silence and timelessness, a vacuum. Events started happening simultaneously, denying the relativity theory which proposed that no events can be "absolutely simultaneous" but one followed the

other refuting the theory of cause and effect. Technology which connected people had suddenly stopped. The novelist DeLillo seems to be hinting that the world would not end by a nuclear apocalypse but in silence. There is no sound while the ice melts on poles, or the sea waves rise almost in silence. This was suspected as the aftermath of the plague which had completely silenced human brains to access their external machines, hard disks, computers, and storage devices. The human debility and destitute stretched rapidly across places. The novelist suggests that all human minds were "digitally remastered," which could be the ill effect of digital addiction as well.

The Silence thus depicts how the current moment, a prolonged pause or a time interval, gives all humans an opportunity to break down and reinvent themselves. The novel concludes with this message, loud and clear, that money, war, politics, and technology only intoxicate the human brain and take men into oblivion. When a man reaches that state, he severs all connections and relationships. Individualism is no longer a way of life, since all images disappear from screens, and those of individuals too. Such an end echoes the subject of DeLillo's previous novel, *Zero K*, wherein man used technology to stop aging and preventing the humanity from disease, and thus subverting death. *The Silence* shows that too much dependence upon technology could lead humans to be deprived of the technology itself, thus resigning to death, not to individual death but to the death of the whole humanity, whole culture, the whole era, and the death of time.

DeLillo thus succeeds in depicting a chaotic and apocalyptic world, but like Arthur Clarke and Isaac Asimov, adds philosophical reflections of the human self. The argument of the novel is making humans realize the significance of the past. Einstein's phrase of "sticks and stone" in the context of the novel's dystopian world, acquires a different meaning. It refers to a retreat into the past, not to look outside toward an ambiguous technology-aided future but inwards to respond to the internal prophetic voice that would align the individual back to the human self.

4.3. Station Eleven (Mandel, 2014)

Station Eleven is a story of a mysterious flu pandemic that swept the entire world, killing "99 percent of the population" within a few days. Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and named as one of the best books of the year by *The Chicago Tribune*, *Station Eleven* takes readers back-and-into time, making emotional connections. between its characters and the past. It projects a world 20 years after the flu apocalypse, therefore, returns to the past to juxtapose present with the time 20 years ago (De Cristofaro, 2018). This is a story of Kirsten Raymonde, an art performer, one of the survivors of the Flu. She was a young child when the pandemic occurred, but she still remembers the trauma, and often strives to piece together her lost identity, parents, and friends. Her memories are vague so she wishes to travel in the quest for her past, seeking to rebuild the past, believing that "survival is insufficient" (May, 2020).

Being the author's mouthpiece, Kirsten Raymonde, is also an art enthusiast who believes that true survival lies in "art, faith, memory, passion and human connection". Mandel pleads, "Art is such a human thing and it shines a light on the darkness of an apocalypse …. That is what Station Eleven is. It is a light on the darkness" (2014: 54). Through her novel, Mandel journeys into several facets of art. *Station Eleven* depicts art transcending survival, having the potential to build new passions, new purpose, and a new way of being human. As a testimony, Kristen is shown involved in Shakespeare's plays, which are not only reminders of a glorious artistic past that the world has lost, but also an attempt to narrate a human story. Art never succumbs to pandemic; it is rather helpful to connect humans with the past. The retrotopian perspective becomes more distinct when Kristen's theatre group travels extensively to perform Shakespeare and disseminate the lost culture with people, and thus attempting to revive the society by returning to traditional art. The novel's message does not surprise the readers, as Mandel is searching solace for the traumatized survivors of the apocalypse in art, music, theatre and making new friends.

4.4. *Lockdown* (May, 2020)

The next novel *Lockdown* is though a crime thriller, but written in the backdrop of bird flu pandemic, caused by an H5N1 bird flu virus allegedly and artificially mutated into a human laboratory. Although written in 2005 after the bird flu epidemic, the novel was rejected by the publishers for being "unrealistic" and that the events described in the novel "could never happen" (May, 2020). What May had hypothesized in 2005 that the whole society would be locked down in their homes; the home would be a place of imprisonment and complete surveillance; and there would be no privacy as the threat of police intervention would always loom. The COVID-19 pandemic proved all these premises true, depicting homes as places deficient of warmth, love, care and attention, even for your loved ones who could be infected with the deadly virus.

The story of the novel is narrated by Dr Amy, the novel's central protagonist, who reminisce the past, the pre-pandemic era, when her home was a warm place, where she found comfort and protection. Due to the pandemic, London had been under indefinite lockdown, engrossed with violence and chaos despite the martial law imposed. The deadly virus had claimed thousands of lives. In the very beginning of the novel, there are images of darkness and confinement, images of a house where the narrator is screaming with horror over the murder that takes place in front of her eyes. Her screams remain inside the thick walls of the old house, failing to penetrate the darkness of the night. She cannot get help from outside because the house is like a dungeon, a frightening place. "There is no way out," May constantly reminds the readers (May, 2020).

Amidst this horror, Amy imagines her father extending his hand towards her. The trauma suddenly changes into a positive feeling, where home is associated with family and parents. Amy cannot see his father's face, but she can hear him smile. 'Come to Daddy,' he says softly." May (2020) this gesture of familial love and endearment between father and child stands as a sharp contrast with the murderer still in the house. The horror is also juxtaposed with "freshly painted doors, and windows with clean, white net curtains," May (2020) which are but ideal signs of a middle-class home-making. Despite her father's virtual presence, Amy sees home as a prison, a slaughterhouse that locks her down. She suffers from claustrophobia which adds to the thrill and horror in the story (Heinz, 2021). At the end of the novel, Amy raises the question of social inequalities and racial discrimination, that are in sharp contrast with the natural habitat that was once provided to the racialized underclass in this very London city.

5. DISCUSSION

This study endeavored to study the new pandemic dystopias as fictional representations of real and plausible events. The novels chosen for the study included DeLillo's *Zone One* (2020); Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014); DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020); Whitehead's *Lockdown* (2011)The underlying similarity in these novels is that they are reactions to flu-pandemics and events related to it. The main objective of this study was to examine the retrotopian perspective of these dystopian narratives in order to understand the elements of positivism in them.

The study concedes both retrotopian perspective in the context of the four pandemic novels chosen for this study. The retrotopian perspective seems to be preferred by each of the novelists, unlike the traditional utopian and dystopian writers. Each of these four writers projects an ideal past as the more plausible solution to their traumatic present rather than speculate a better future. For instance, in *Zone One*, while Mark Spitz goes into flashbacks, he preserves the past memories to end his emptiness (Sorensen, 2014), Max in *The Silence* rejoices at the death of technology and returning to the more stable past, Kirsten Raymonde in *Station Eleven* resorts to Shakespearean plays as the link to connect humans with the pre pandemic past and Dr Amy in *Lockdown* finds solace in recreating her father's memories in the traumatized present.

The protagonists in each of these four novels suffers traumas and witnesses the apocalypse both internally and externally. Each of these protagonists appears to be engaged in a quest into the past and searching for the lost identity. This is consistent with the views of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who believed that humans take

pleasure in recollecting the past because it can be "remodeled at will", and that it provides "blissful omnipotence" absent in the present. Bauman also echoes the underlying messages of these pandemic dystopias, each of which is associated with regression into the past, a renaissance of more stable life patterns. Bauman calls it "social degradation" of an "impending catastrophe" in sharp contrast with the past, the retrotopian perspective, that offered "privatization of happiness" to the ones suffering the trauma of the present. In case of any obstacle in rebuilding the past, Mandel suggests in *Station Eleven* to use the power of imagination not only to survive happily but also to define new paradigms to understand the present and the future (Leggatt, 2018). In an interview, Mandel confessed that reliving the past memories helped her create fiction, to structure the plot in a "non-linear" fashion with completely different perspectives (Feldner, 2018).

All these dystopian tales cannot be termed as fully novels of fantasy as they are rooted in the reality. The death of technology is announced in *The Silence* because the author thinks that the technology that was promised could not arrive, rather humanity has to face adverse results of technology. Technology has created social- cultural and spiritual barriers between humans in the name of infrastructural and economic benefits. In *Zone One*, the world is infected with insecurity and violence, which is projected in the form of Zombies multiplying in "skels" and "stragglers". The fear and anxiety, and the constant surveillance of the governments in the contemporary world are examples of instability that the entire world is witnessing today. The dystopian worlds in *Station Eleven* and *Lockdown* hint at these anxieties and fragmented individualism, negating social and familial bliss. Hence, instead of turning towards future, the tide in these dystopias swing towards the past, to reorient the people's mindset and take a U-turn, as Bauman termed in his retrotopia.

Bauman is highly acclaimed as a "utopian postmodernist" (Kellner, 1998) and this reflects in his theory of retrotopia. Its echo is seen in Dr Amy's vision of her father or in Mark Spitz's flashbacks, both aiming to recreate old social bonds of their families and community. The post-modernistic element is clearly evident in their attempt to break the present barriers and relocate stronger, new bonds (Heffernan, 2008; Rosen, 2008). Such a post modernistic thinking also echoes in Freudian principle of discontentment (Freud, 1921) or the 'welfare nostalgia' (Fenger, 2018) which are just examples of a nostalgic rhetoric building up a retrotopian perspective. While Freud links the retrotopian feeling with fear and anxiety, or dissatisfaction with the civilization, yet craving for an aggressive revival of the past, the 'welfare nostalgia' unambiguously hints at the lost sense of "place" and a longing for "home" (Fenger, 2018). This ideology is consistent with several authors, besides Bauman and Fenger (Hemerijck, 2013; Mudde, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2016) who have recounted nostalgic narratives about the lost golden age, albeit in the context of "welfare capitalism," an inevitable ingredient of most dystopias. All these writers have popularized the radical, rightwing capitalistic agenda in Western Europe, their discourse about nostalgia is quite relevant in the context of the retrotopian novels.

Most of the speculative fiction until recent times were either dystopian tales about a dark future or sci-fi narratives dreaming about the fulfilment of hopes and desires; but none of them remembered the past, the faith that people nurtured, the stability that people experienced and the trustworthiness that existed between people (Heffernan, 2008; Hicks, 2016). The retrotopian perspective found in these pandemic dystopias seem to be talking about a renaissance, a revival of the past, which can be seen a deliberate negation of the futuristic visions of other speculative fiction. However, these pandemic fictions are in the nascent stage, therefore none of them speaks confidently about security and individual freedom; the retrotopian perspective only hints at the longing for the past. The protagonist in each novel discussed in this study is symbolized as Orpheus, in an unsuccessful quest for what the humanity has lost. However, each wishes a rehabilitation, a rebirth of the humanitarian model of the society, and to return to a much more civilized life style.

6. CONCLUSION

The study has attempted to decipher the rhetoric of fear and anxiety in selected pandemic dystopias with a view to understand the retrotopian perspective in each of these tales. These pandemic dystopias witness the end of an era, the age of ideology and utopianism. Contrary to the utopian or ideal state, in fact, each of these novels announces the advent of a kind of *atopia*, a term that seems more topical in the context of these pandemic dystopias. Etymologically, *atopia* is derived from the same Greek word topos (τόπος) means 'place'. It would then roughly mean a "non-place," a state of a disease not localized in any particular part of the body. When widely applied in fiction, it would mean "placelessness". In a world of zombies or deadly infected virus, there is no place for any individual, no Reservation or Island where the protagonist would find comfort or a home. Each individual in this pandemic era has to struggle like Sisyphus, to live a miserable life, amidst the zombie corpses and digital garbage, announcing the death of humanity and technology together. The question that each of these novels raises is: what will replace them? Will it be organic or inorganic? Perhaps resurrection into the past is the answer, the hope in all these novels. The retrotopian perspective stands out as an optimistic vision of a renewed world state, an inspiration more than man felt with the progress of technology.

No research has so far been conducted using the retrotopian framework (Clegg, 2018) hence this study would have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it would open new avenues, finding a path for the retrotopian framework into the dystopian genre. It would fill up the research gap that currently existed in the field of dystopian literature related to the past or retrospective studies. This would also open a new avenue to explore the possibility of experimenting into devising a new theory or a genre of retrotopia within the utopian or speculative fiction. In academia, the retrotopian perspective would provide an alternative model of critical analysis to interpret a dystopian text. Teachers may apply the retrotopian technique in the literary interpretation and pedagogical analysis of a literary text, particularly a dystopia. Last, but not the least, this study would stimulate interests among literature instructors to experiment this technique to interpret other types of text, namely the colonial fiction or the diaspora, which are closely related to a dystopia.

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