

Are the social constructs a delusional theory or a colossal and real headache in *The Giver* ?

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Abstract : The novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry explores modern life and how it leads to dystopia without us consciously apprehending the unfortunate event. In fact, human life is already in a dystopian society. Thus, this article seeks the opinions of philosophers, journalists, anthropologist to understand why human beings tend to disintegrate and question if this can be reversed. If at all this can be reversed, what would reverse it? The article questions why societies and governments function the way they do.

Keywords : history, ethical systems, moral law, history, cultural memory

1.1 Introduction

At the turn of the 20th Century, life in England and Europe had turned sour, in fact, bitter. Embitterment was a natural consequence of all the theories, opinions, philosophies man had gathered as a stone gathers moss. Muggeridge, the British satirist and journalist said, “we tend to accumulate a lot of waste matter as we go along... [collecting] some moment of ostensible drama in one’s life, ... ministering to one’s self-esteem” (Muggeridge, 2006: 19). Of course, life is a sum of all experiences gathered together, but whether humans have lived true to the collected opinions and theories is a question. No matter what socio-political theory man is affiliated to, his life always has a different story to tell. Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, echoes the same sentiment, “Thus we never live, but hope to live, and while we always lay ourselves out to be happy, it is inevitable that we can never be so” (Pascal 57). Muggeridge continues to say that humans have never learnt life by homilies or theories, but “only from the experience of living, or... the distillation of that experience” (2006: 27). If life is an individual perception of events, what good are theories and philosophies? And lies and halftruths added to the doom.

Lowry’s first book of the *Quartet*, *The Giver*, has unusual and astonishing questions about life and also serves to answer the most grappling of them all in plain and simple terms. The novel takes place in a distant future that looks almost like a post-apocalyptic community. The crux of the story is about memory and how the tool that gives human awareness and connects one human to another within the family and society is compromised in the society. Memory is associated with time and it transforms man life as it defines the concept of past, present and future. Memory makes experiences to transform from a transient memory to a timeless entity. As generations of people come and go through the passage of time, a historical or cultural memory is created. Also, it creates a communal and personal memory.

In *The Giver*, the protagonist, the twelve-year old Jonas, who appears to live in a highly specialized community, is surprised on hearing the word ‘generations’. He hadn’t heard the word until then. It was a revealing moment for him to learn from the Giver that long time ago humans had a past, present and a future and that generations of men lived from ancient times. So here was a generation that was completely oblivious to its predecessors.

1.2 The Research Problem

Thus, here was a society that looked in every way a naturalistic, and secular society. But soon it would be revealed they had no notion about ethics, religion, philosophy or even

culture. These concepts, over time, had been made obsolete by the Elders on the pretext that they are primordial, and suitable only to medieval times. Their only vision of life was today. Their identities or connection to their family, their previous generation, and even their inner self was non-existent. In short, the people in Jonas' community had nothing left of life. They were merely existing, or surviving in an unlivable community. All characters in the novel lived by the strict rules of the community. This article focuses on this simple yet complicated book that resonates with a lot of sadness - because in plain language, the people who live in it are disjointed from reality, and the book pleads for creativity, design, value, justice, love and humanity to return to the community.

Lowry, by presenting a world of non-entities, is envisioning for her teen readers, value of their emotions, memories, feelings and thoughts. It is through these innate capacities that life becomes validated. But, in *The Giver*, the society cordoned off all these aspects that were once believed and practiced by men. In other words, the book is a plea to go back in time and restart from where humanity had left. Hendricks calls this modern dilemma "a collective headache" because humans who are ethical beings must strive with this new way of living as society progresses over time (1). These societies may look speculative to the reader, but there are real societies that had to give up a few of these aspects because as newer political systems take over, they don't support the idea of ethics to discredit human life. *The Giver* is a poignant book that yearns for a return to the immaculate creation of man as it was in the beginning. The foundational beliefs of man is the only anchor that humans have in the present time to be able to tide over the terrible confusion caused by such raging theories.

Addressing the problem of why political systems try to negate belief systems or viewpoints is important here. It may be surprising to know that they are considered threats. Sadly, they are only dangerous for the political systems but not for the people. To understand better, belief systems liberate the spirit and the soul from the baseness of life. It emphasizes on values and ethics. The soul mattered more over the body. The soul, or consciousness, is the core memory on which human life's foundation is based. Whereas, the world systems or political systems seek to annihilate the spirit, quench the soul and thus, assimilation of human life through control is easier as witnessed in *The Giver*. To achieve complete control over the subjects they rule, they remove the innate capacity of man to keep their political play intact.

By removing the past, and reducing the present, and obliterating the future, do they achieve what they wish to achieve? Yes and no are the answers. Yes, because they prescribe rules to their society as the only formula for good living. When one in the community accepts, the human tendency is to conform. People take time to suspect the intentions and the agendas of their rulers. When knowledge is withheld, ignorance rings the death knell. At the same time, no, because human beings are social, thinking, and living beings. Man can be ignorant, or his mind can be genetically manipulated or altered, but his innermost self cannot be obliterated. Man can only live through their spirit, and imbibe life with their soul, and express it through their body. This is how humans have been wired. Soul is a timeless entity like the spirit. Can dystopian societies hide them forever? Memory connects the three vitalities together.

To make humans undergo a process that doesn't involve ethics and morality is dangerous because it unalives them. Being 'unalive' is not death; but worse than that – it is a state of knowing that you have no opportunity to live. Their past is erased, their belongingness is hidden and their future becomes an inconceivable non-entity. Dystopian societies gave up moral systems because moral laws, like a double-edged sword, reminded them of living within their boundaries. They didn't require ethical systems because they had their rules and they created a set of applicable punishment for 'sheer pragmatism' (Zecharias 35). In place of morality and ethics, they had laws and rules. Like the tower of Babel, it crumbled as soon as it was built.

1.3 Key Concepts

Three groups of characters emerge in this novel - first, the Committee of Elders, secondly, the people who receive instructions from the Committee, and thirdly, the Custodians of Memory, like Jonas. The first group rules. They sit for long hours and decide if any rule must be changed. This rule change would take years to alter and it was jokingly told in the community that 'the Committee members would become Elders by the time the rule change was made' (TG 14). They would 'fret and argue about it themselves for years' and people would have forgotten about it (14). Lois Lowry's light commentary about the political sphere can be read with the backdrop of events that happen in real societies, and it is often found to be true. People in leadership positions, like in *The Giver*, always make the claim like the French King Louis XIV (1643 - 1715) - to whom was attributed the dictum '*L'Etat, c'est moi; Le Peuple, c'est moi*' meaning 'I am the State; I am the people'. (Muggeridge, 2006: 218). The Committee of Elders is the controlling and manipulating entity. To enforce their rules, the Committee uses a group of enforcers, sometimes in the form of technology. The people served the rulers with utmost loyalty. As Muggeridge rightly pointed out about the despotic king in his book *The Chronicles of Wasted Time*, "All the toiling masses everywhere, their will, their purpose, their very being, embodied in this one man, who spoke and acted, and even lived, on their behalf" (2006: 218). Though the Giver had immense knowledge and capacity, he could not make any improvement to his society. In fact, the Giver shared that the Committee of Elders never sought his wisdom, though he often wished they would ask him. Without finding a receiver, the Giver kept the wisdom to himself. He himself had to wait for Jonas, the next Receiver, and hoped that he was bestowed with the sensibilities required to keep the first group in check and redeem the second group. The first group, the rulers, are in positions of power. But the saviors of the third group occupy positions of honor. Lowry's position was that there was hope to mankind when leadership becomes positions of honor, and not power.

What gives this group of powerful entities their power? What is the source of power and what is the tool used to manipulate the individuals and the societies as a whole? Individuals grow on information shared with them. If it is withheld, it becomes the primary tool to gain control, win over arguments and shape the world as the entities wish. Jonas learns later that his community has been

prohibited from access to historical and cultural memory, from the knowledge of a past time, events, and cultural manifestations such as art and music, with their attendant passions such as fear, pride, envy, sorrow, joy, and love. They live in a colorless climate-controlled environment that has eliminated the experience of weather and seasons, and eradicated animals (Davis Para 7).

Most often, belief systems are made obsolete not only by governments, but also by Science. Science deconstructs life to be meaningless, in the sense that it defines life as cell structures. Arlie Hoover, the apologist, beautifully states that "the miracles of science are irrelevant to the truth of naturalism as a metaphysic" (Hoover 56). Human nature is personal and axiomatic; whereas, science is impersonal and non-axiological. To rule human beings using a set of scientific propositions or principles, is to annihilate the human race. Lowry's *The Giver* is a passionate plea to revive the remaining flicker of human spirit that might be able to reach its eternal foundations. As each generation passes, the soul gets detached from reality and Lowry fears that social order should not take precedence over the essence of the spirit. With each political system taking over the other, that future is at stake. In the novel, hills, valleys and meadows were flattened to allow smooth flow of transportation. Similarly, flora and fauna are banned, except for the heavily manicured lawns.

Simply stated, human beings live in a mental prison. Even their intentions are somehow read by the Committee of Elders. For example, Asher had a lot of jokes and they

believed he would be assigned to be the funny guy. So, when Lily, inadvertently spoke about her love for the vocation to become a Birth Mother, mother immediately chides her not to speak or even think of it because she knows they may be heard.

Furthermore, the value of history is poorly presented in dystopian societies. The citizens of the Community are people with names but, on close introspection, surprisingly, they don't have surnames. They don't have parents, in the sense of having biological parents. They are brought out in the world by the Birth-mother and cared for by a Nurturer and 'assembled' into family units based on their application. They work in farms, schools, offices, and in caregivers' homes.

Through the Giver, Jonas understands that information has a significant role: in shaping history and memory, both of the individual and the community. But each character must rediscover this through his own experiences, however painful or traumatic the experiences may be. By forgetting painful memories, man has allowed a dystopian concept to take over his psyche. "Memory is not to be associated with duty and guilt but with freedom and happiness" (Cemiloglu 69).

He could not bear the pain of mankind. Pain and suffering are unpleasant experiences that affect the body and the mind. Man often shirks off from pain considering the anguish and the mental trauma. But Muggeridge posits this way:

"Supposing you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be! I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the mostghastly place because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered (Muggeridge 127). Memory can bring unhappiness, like how it brought to Rosemary, but it is through the same memory that "unbearable features are eliminated" and a new world can be re-created (Cemiloglu 70).

At the same time, *The Giver* is not a tragic tale of lost human will, but a tale of grasping the eternity of the human heart. There are elements of hope and desire for change in the novel. Moreover, no dystopian worldview of totalitarianism has had an answer for humanity's destiny. They pretend to be the emancipator of all mankind, but avoid describing destiny. If there is birth, there is death. If there is a past, there is a future. Since these societies thrive on *survival*, their lack of definition for destiny invalidates their merit. But on deeper study, their claims of emancipation is a disguise of power and its lies "sit in plain sight, from its wicked distortions of language to its utter disregard for human life" (Miller 26).

Terror tactics and severe reprimanding are also common features in dystopian societies. Every aberration or variance is viewed with great suspicion. Fritz, one of the characters in *The Giver*, is an awkward child. He was "*summoned*" often and chastised again and again. Lois Lowry poignantly adds the word "*transgressions*" to talk about the small child's clumsiness. In fact, that is how dystopian societies view human clumsiness or weakness.

"His *transgressions* were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork *misplaced*, *failure* to study adequately for a quiz. But each such *error* reflected negatively on his parents' guidance and infringed on the community's sense of *order* and *success* (TG 45).

Reprimanding and ostracizing from the community were regular happenings in the community. Asher, one of Jonas' friends, couldn't pronounce the word *snack* and he always said 'smack'. A discipline wand escalated to "a series of painful lashes that left marks on Asher's legs" (TG 55). One can imagine life in such a community. All terror tactics and reprimanding were to ensure that they fit in.

The whole novel is anchored on Jonas who, like Prometheus, has vision for his community. The difference between his life as the Receiver and as the young Jonas is that he had questions for which he had no answers. But once he was given memories, he began to

understand answers too. Lois Lowry's dystopian fiction points to the creative vision of the human race.

The saga of change comes to him when he learns painfully from the Giver the burden of generations, or the memories of generations, that he has been carrying all alone for a very long time. Jonas has been specially chosen because he was observed to have "intelligence, integrity, courage" and the ability to bear "physical pain" (TG 62). Jonas is afraid that he cannot share it with others because he will undergo a pain "of a magnitude that none of us here can comprehend because it is beyond our experience" (63). But Jonas braves it all as he had learned much from the Giver for almost a year. Jonas will be the right Receiver because he had the "capacity to see beyond" (63).

It must be understood that political systems' major tools are assimilation and deactivation of memory. Memory has a utopian function, according to Vincent Geoghegan (52). In his article, he mentions the purpose and function of memory. Memory has the capacity to memorize - events, conscious and unconscious processes and systems and memorize "memory" itself. Thus, memory has a vital function - "recollection, recognition, reminiscence". He believes that "utopias, in short, can be both rational and feasible". His description of utopianism seems to be the best among other definitions. He says utopianism is the "human need and capacity to create a desirable environment" (Geoghegan 52). It is this creative aspect of the mind that is the greatest threat to political and social systems. Political systems cannot handle the individual and, in every possible way, expect it to naturally assimilate with the collective. The "I" of the individual exists, only at the ruling level, which more often is a collective group of people, and the remaining will essentially have to become collective narratives with no voice of its own. The state, or country, or social group is governed by a ruler, not a leader, who is mostly remote and whose identity is never revealed. To efficiently run the system, a faithful group or force is utilized, or technology comes into force. Life gets slowly regulated using the terrifying pain of death, or 'release'. The community is made to believe the fact that "release" is shameful by making their names to be forbidden to be pronounced in the society. By stigmatizing individuality, collective-regulated behavior is successfully achieved. Thinking differently, or even responding differently is anathema.

But, while writers create dystopian literature to express the dangers to human civilization in the imminent future, some writers use their literary work as *apologia*. Apologetics is a systematic defense of a principle by using logical discourse propounding a religious theory or a point of view. Thus, in every sense of the word, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is Apologetics. It argues for Faith, not just Christian but faith in any other belief system, as the greatest nourishment of an intellectual seeker, who seeks to anchor his or her life, somehow connecting the past with the future in tally with the present. In spite of several diminishing factors, like famine, poverty, wars, loss of social values, man has to hold on to faith, in spite of all contentions and arguments.

Thus, as seen above, based on the legitimacy of the principle, challenging the factors of this anarchic and entropic world, Jonas has stood his ground. As the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin rightly points out, belief systems are the restraints that the world needs. In his book, *We*, he declares thus:

Those two [Adam and Eve], in paradise, were given a choice: happiness without freedom, or freedom without happiness. There was no third alternative. Those idiots chose freedom, and what came of it? Of course, for ages afterward they longed for the chains. The chains-you understand? That's what world sorrow was about (Zamyatin 62).

In a certain sense, Jonas is Lowry herself and she knew her “training will be alone and apart” (TG 65). Most dystopian fiction was meant for an adult audience. Lowry was one of the first writers to write on such serious themes to teenagers and adolescents. When she published *The Giver*, she received much acclaim and at the same time, criticism from American parents for teaching children to disobey their parents and governments.

Thus, realization and growing up doesn't come with age but with tenderness and the inquisition towards the 'why' of everything. Thus, even teenagers are capable of high learning, emotional intelligence and find answers to the complexities man created for himself. Jonas learned that he must first understand the person inside himself, and through that ability to peer through, he should be able to comprehend fellow human beings, and thus, arrive at a conclusion on every aspect of life. Life can be comprehended as a sum total of man with his surroundings - people, nature, and society, thereby, meaning that the whole world is one family. The human family is a microcosm of the larger order, but anarchy seeks to nullify all the factors of existence, thereby, destroying the fabric of creation.

Lois Lowry's novels are a tender plea for conscientious living. Even animals in Orwell's farm, the animals knew to protest against human beings from being overused too much. But human beings have lost the capacity to question. Like Adam and Eve, they have chosen freedom. With freedom available, they have chosen sameness. “Sometimes I wish they'd ask for my wisdom more often. There are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they don't want change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable - so painless. It is what they have chosen” (103).

Summing up, this research leads us to the foundational question which is pertinently asked by the Giver. This is the take of this research. Dystopian societies are self-seeking societies. But human beings are wired to care for one another. Their primary goal is to understand what is beyond, reach for it and accept it, not with a superficial obeisance, but with a rational argument. Everyone has a call beyond the daily routine of life. We live our routine lives, of course, but, during these casual exchanges, “life defining and life-transforming conversations take place.” (Zecharias,13).

Conclusion:

Lois Lowry's novel is an attempt not with ideas and theories, but with real human lives. Just as Jonas is Lowry herself, *The Giver* is perhaps the novel itself. Knowledge is a pricey commodity and often a tool of empowerment. Lyotard sees knowledge as being communicated through narratives and the different world views such narratives bring (Lyotard, 202). Thus, the novel is a tool of empowerment, a pricey commodity, indeed, transporting to a different world view.