

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the Contemporary Reality

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to draw an outline of similitude by analyzing and comparing one of the critically acclaimed dystopian novels, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, with the contemporary society. Although on surface Huxley's novel depicts an ideal fictional society, on delving deeper it is ascertained that it is a dystopia disguised under the garb of utopia. It explores the themes of genetic engineering, Pavlovian conditioning, consumerism, dissipation of science and sexual promiscuity while reflecting over the shifting concerns and angst of contemporary society. The novel prompts the readers to consider their own morals, convictions, and decisions in light of the fictitious social settings that Huxley has created. The crux of this paper is to trace the affinity between Huxley's *Brave New World* and the contemporary world that has seen various forms of advancements in technology and behavioral modulations and has undergone numerous changes. Our journey towards *Brave New World* doesn't seem like a far cry. Huxley broods over the fundamental issues hovering over mankind.

Keywords: Apocalypse, consumerism, dystopia, hypnopaedia, technology.

Aldous Huxley wrote the dystopian novel *Brave New World*, which was first released in 1932. The novel describes a dystopian future in which people are genetically modified and socialized to conform to a rigid caste system. In a future where everything is under the control of a strong state, the novel examines topics of individuality, freedom, happiness, and morality. This highly known novel, transformed into a number of different media formats, has not quite achieved the same level of popular cultural success as compared to other works of the genre. This is unfortunate because it gives us a clear picture of a dystopia that our society has not only moved towards, but has warmly embraced it. As we notice clearly in the novel:

She would tell him about the lovely music that came out of the box, and all the nice games you could play, and the delicious things to eat and drink... and the pictures you could hear and feel as well as see...and everybody happy and no one ever sad or angry, and everyone belonging to everyone else...and babies in lovely clean bottles--everything so clean, and no nasty smells, no dirt at all--and people never lonely, but living together and being so jolly and happy...and the happiness being there every day, every day...(117)

This is *Brave New World* as defined by Linda to her son John; at first glance it appears to be the most ideal and propitious world, what more could one envisage to have in order to be happy forever: a place where there is absolutely no chance of sorrows and sufferings, a place that the real world is striving to become. But as the story develops, readers discover the hoax of this happy world. The fact that our world, which has a very uncanny resemblance to certain aspects depicted in the *Brave New World*, is definitely a topic of further analysis and confabulation, which is what we shall discuss in this paper.

Citizens in the *Brave New World* are reproduced at the “Hatchery and Conditioning Centre”(7) by using the process of ‘decantation’ and ‘bokanovskification’. Aldous Huxley refers to the procedure of taking human embryos from their artificial wombs, where they have been developed and prepared for nine months, as “decantation” in *Brave New World*. According to their predefined castes, which range from Alpha, the highest and most brilliant, to Epsilon, the lowest and most subservient, the embryos are decanted. The lower castes—Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon—are subjected to the Bokanovsky Process, a method of mass producing humans. It includes shocking an egg that is fertilized to cause it to split into up to 96 identical embryos, which are then placed in bottles and given various procedures to ensure their physical and mental conformity. The World State can easily control and condition massive groups of identical employees produced by the Bokanovsky Process.

Both the processes have an uncanny resemblance with CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) which is a potent tool that allows for gene editing in living things. CRISPR could be used to alter human embryos' genes, which could have an impact on both the features of the embryos themselves and their descendants. Human germline genome editing is the term for this process. However, this process is debatable because it involves moral, legal, and public health concerns. There is a possibility that this technology might be used to develop custom babies, improve human capabilities, or prevent or treat genetic illnesses or to deliberately create them; it might have unexpected repercussions or be abused. The modified embryo or gamete can then be inserted into a surrogate mother by in vitro fertilization (IVF). Thus, all of the offspring's cells, including their reproductive cells, will contain the altered gene.

Huxley seemed to have a glimpse of the future when he said that consuming soma would enable you to “Take a holiday from reality whenever you like, and come back without so much as a headache or a mythology.” (53) Soma is used in *Brave New World* to stifle freedom by keeping people in a state of artificial happiness all the time. This results in a loss of autonomous thought and mental pain, leading to addiction and then eventually death. Similar scenario has been observed in different studies, where in the last few decades rise and dependency upon similar drugs like fentanyl, antidepressants and opioids etc. has been observed. Berkeley Political Review, published an article, “America’s Epidemic of Antidepressants” written by Megan Pagaduan, the article stated that, Antidepressant use has skyrocketed since 1999, leading it to become one of the most popular types of pharmaceutical drug in the U.S. with approximately one in six Americans on antidepressants, including more than quarter of those as long term users. (1)

It also hinted at the fact that a population's high antidepressant usage rates may not always reflect a grim reality. Among OECD nations, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have the highest rates of antidepressant usage. Another study mentioned in the article is one conducted between 1996-2007.

The proportion of visits at which antidepressants were prescribed, but patients were not diagnosed with a mental health disorder, increased from 59.5 percent to 72.7 percent. (1)

The report even mentioned, it is concerning to note that long-term antidepressant use can also result in physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms, making it challenging or almost impossible for patients to stop taking them. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, published an article, "Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic" which clearly mentioned that, more than 564,000 people died from opioid overdoses between 1999 and 2020, including those caused by prescription and illegal opioids. People are given the drug soma in *Brave New World* as a method to escape reality and deal with stress. Soma causes a sense of pleasure and relaxation. For instance, they chant "a gramme is better than a damn"(54) to support their addiction and take some vacations to forget their problems. Drug usage is becoming a global issue that affects millions of people from all walks of life and cultural origins. Both legal and illicit drugs are used by people for medical purposes and substance abuse, leading our society to have zero tolerance towards feelings of displeasure and becoming slaves of drugs similar in properties to soma.

Hypnopaedia, a term coined by Huxley in the novel alludes to the method of constantly playing recorded messages to instruct individuals while they sleep. In the book, the World State uses hypnopaedia to indoctrinate and shape its subjects from an early age, molding their attitudes, preferences, and behaviors to fit prescribed societal roles. It entails using speakers next to the kids' beds to broadcast recorded messages to them as they sleep. These messages recite catchphrases and slogans that advocate consumerism, social conformity, and contentment with one's designated caste and function in society. For instance, some of the messages kids hear are:

"A gramme is better than a damn."(54), "Ending is better than mending."(49),

"Everyone belongs to everyone else."(43), "I'm so glad I'm a Beta."(28), "Progress is lovely."(93)

Children can be indoctrinated using hypnopaedia without their knowledge or consent. For instance, citizens of the world state hear five hundred repetitions once a week between the age of thirteen to seventeen of the statement, "Progress is lovely."(93). In the modern world, hypnopaedia can be compared to mass media and social media which also shapes people's ideas and actions through continuous exposure to particular messages. The media has the power to influence how people feel about a variety of issues, including politics, society, religion, and lifestyle. As an illustration, some of the messages that the media propagates are, "A certain standard of physical appearance serves to define beauty" "Increasing one's consumption of goods and services will make one happier." "Tolerance and diversity are significant social ideals." "The means of advancement are science and technology."

People who hold similar beliefs and tastes can develop a sense of identity and belongingness through the use of the media. In today's scenario we are encapsulated by so many different sources of mass media: television ads, music, movies and social media. They play a similar role as compared to

hypnopaedia of imbedding positive and negative messages in our brains consciously as well as unconsciously. We listen and see certain ideas, words, and ways of lifestyle which are fed to our brains in the form of information. Then we conform to them without reasonable critical thinking. Relevance plays a vital role too, we conform to many of these ideas just to be socially relevant because the concept of social relevancy is created by the market magnets with a definite long term profit motive; and the one who does not follow the current pattern becomes out of social order. For example, music in today's era promotes recurring themes of taboo subjects as half-nude materialistic lifestyle, drug abuse, meaningless violent sex, blatantly convincing and tempting the audience that has practically abandoned critical thinking that this is the new way of life, perishing human values in the name of pop culture. Huxley seemed to believe that truth would be overtaken by relevance. 'Hypnopaedia' is defined as "liquid sealing wax" for the brain in *Brave New World*; mass media and social media in today's society are acting similar to this 'wax' by encrusting ideologies in our brains, manipulating our beliefs, ideas, blurring the images of virtues eradicating the lines between wrong and right by brainwashing human civilization, leading to cultural death. Niel Postman articulates this situation in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, impeccably when he says—

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby talk; when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act. Then a nation finds itself at risk. Culture death is a clear possibility. (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 157)

Huxley presents the World State, as a high tech world and successfully puts across the idea that people will eventually come to enjoy their oppression and the technology that disable their cognitive abilities, and turn into a trivial society, which has become passive due to the amount of information it would receive which would be equivalent to what he mentions as 'feelies' or 'orgy-porgy' in his book. He also remarked in *Brave New World Revisited* that the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions."

Technology is used to promote mass production, consumerism; it is used to distort thinking and cognitive powers. It makes the citizens love their servitude enslaving them to pleasure and avoiding irrelevancy at all cost by using technological distractions, suppressing individuality and solitary reflections. The World State mass-produces humans in hatcheries using scientific procedures, where they are genetically altered and conditioned to fit into established social groups and jobs. According to the World State consumption is considered as a duty and a source of satisfaction as well as a tool to prevent communal turmoil and individual revolt. Citizens are continually amused by films, games, sports, and sex, which prevents them from thinking deeply or feeling emotions. Technology has basically transformed the citizens into human robots. It demonstrates how technology can dehumanize people and take away their identity and dignity. It also demonstrates how technology can provide an illusion of happiness and fulfillment while concealing the truth and reality of human existence. A resemblance can be observed in contemporary society on so many levels, from spending time on making and watching reels to free access that people have to the latest Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology released on almost every platform.

We have developed every technology that can make our lives easier and do our job ten times more efficiently than we can. In the quest of freedom through technology we have turned into slaves of technology, our rusting intellectual and critical thinking skills are proof enough. In an age of consumerism and mass production we are continuously bombarded by commercials, propaganda, and things that companies and corporations want us to buy, do, and think. The fad for owning the latest version of I-phone and other electronic gadgets regardless of need is an accurate example of consumerism and mass production. In the quest of being relevant in the fast-pace society and its trends we have been distracted from the things that really matter in our lives. As a race, we have become trivial and materialistic. As Huxley predicted, we have fallen in love with slavery.

We can affirm that there are innumerable similarities between Huxley's dystopian society and the contemporary society, and it is not wrong to conclude that we do have resemblance to *Brave New World*, and we surely are on the path of becoming its citizens. But it can not be acknowledged as the biggest threat to mankind. It seems inevitable to avoid transforming into this apocalyptic society because it is man who created technology and it is he, whose unquenchable thirst of power and ultimate happiness and perfect life has resulted in an absurd and meaningless robotic existence, making him gradually devoid of any faith. We are trying exceptionally hard to become all powerful, and dreaming of perpetual comfort, but life is supposed to be a harmonious combination of both sorrow and happiness where one derives its meaning from the other. What Huxley really wanted to instill in us through his novel was never to stop looking for truth and cease questioning, but to keep individuality and humanity alive, just like John, who wanted God, poetry, freedom, goodness as well as sin and discomfort. Being human is maddening and complex, but is worth every tear and every smile. What we truly need is balance among all the opposites of life to avoid the inevitable slavery of pleasure and dominance; we need to stop looking for sensory happiness, which is temporary illusion, and search for true joy. The novel is a reflection of our civilization's need to be in constant control of everything through acceptance and submission. It is also an example of the fact that there is always something that controls us, be it 'soma' or 'mass media', 'social media', 'technology', 'society', or 'antidepressants'. To break the control of the unhealthy spell it is high time that we should start questioning ourselves, otherwise it will be impossible for us to steer clear of metamorphosing into Huxley's nightmare society, unless we are aspiring to be exactly that.

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