

## UNDERNEATH THE GUT TREND: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF YANN MARTEL'S WE ATE THE CHILDREN LAST

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### Abstract

The idea behind dystopian writing is located within its nuance of being oppressed. This is often associated with the relationship between the tyrannical government and its vulnerable citizens, the upper class and the lower ones, or someone who has the ability or power over someone else. With these ideas, this paper attempts to unravel the social imbalance done by the government, in the dystopian article *We Ate the Children Last* by Yann Martel using Critical Discourse Analysis and Transitivity. Within the analysis, Fairclough's four steps and Halliday's language analysis will be used as the theoretical framework, seeking how power is distributed and used in the text. While on the method, the qualitative method will be used as the bridge to interpret the transitivity theory and relate it to Fairclough's four steps. Through this study, it will show how power can be seen within the language, especially in literature, such as dystopia, and the alternative solutions to the problem.

**Keywords:** *Dystopian, Critical Discourse Analysis, Government, Power, Fairclough*

### Introduction

In analyzing the nuance of being oppressed within literature, one should see how it mostly correlates to the idea of dystopian writing. This correlation can be seen from its definition. According to its definition, dystopian literature represents the conditions of unequal and oppression within the society and even the environment due to its government. Ryan states that the world is filled with perfectness only toward the privileged ones. Dewi uses terrible futures to depict dystopian literature (Ryan, 2014). The terrible futures include people being forced to submit to tyrants and living with limited power in economics, politics, and technology (Dewi, 2020). Therefore, through these definitions, dystopian literature certainly plays on the themes of power abuse in the context of economics, politics, and the culture of fictional society within its writing.

One of the dystopian literature is *We Ate the Children Last* by Yann Martel in 2004. It is a dystopian article published in the Guardian about a society that attempts to fix the social problem of poverty and hunger by transplanting a pig's digestive system to a human (Martel, 2004). Ultimately deciding on picking the digestive system of a pot-bellied pig species, scientists managed to extend a cancer patient's digestive flexibility, saving him from immediate death. A catch, however, lies in the side effects of having such a volatile organ; intense hunger, loss of the need to sleep, undisgusted by raw food, freeganism, and eventually cannibalism. The government, however, seems to turn a blind eye toward this case even after it has caught popularity. The young, unique, and influential people started to adopt this trend. When the rise of pig-stomached-people coincided with the disappearance of the elderly, riots, reduction of the number of stray cats & and dogs, and eventually live acts of cannibalism, the government only responded with hostility toward the masses and

the creation of concentration camps. Initially, what seemed like a mental asylum for the pig-stomached people, these camps also became places to imprison the innocent via Gulag-like or Auschwitz-like arrests during the era of Hitler, Stalin, or Mao.

From the summary, it can be seen that there is a power play from the government toward the citizens. However, using definitions and summaries only to determine the foul play of power in dystopian literature can reduce the analysis essence as insufficient, and less critical. To avoid that, other alternatives, such as examining the language become something that can be considered more useful and engaging. This idea is supported by Gee and Fairclough. According to Gee, language plays in the equation of power abuse in dystopian literature as it is something that constructs ‘reality’ and meaning (Gee, 2011). On the other hand, Fairclough points out the language's ability to become the medium for people to communicate things, such as ideologies which Fairclough considers as something that is closely related to power (Fairclough, n.d.). Hence, this paper aims to look at the power play in dystopian literature, one needs to take a look at the language.

Then, a question arises, such as which method is suitable for analyzing dystopian literature as it needs to look over the power play within its language. This is when Critical Discourse Analysis comes in. According to Fairclough, there is a link – a dialectical link that connects the social and language of one particular context. Because of that, the emphasis is placed on examining the text based on linguistic analysis and the discourse orders through interdiscursive investigation (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, this paper aims to expose the power play *within We Ate the Children Last* through linguistic and social approaches by Critical Discourse Analysis.

#### Method

In this section, it will provide the method along with the story's context. Starting with the method, this paper will be using the qualitative method and critical discourse analysis. The qualitative method is a method of research that mainly analyses the data that are word. Because of this feature, it allows this paper to have additional data to comprehend stories, especially dystopian literature, such as *We Ate the Children Last* by Yann Martell (Highnett & McDermott, 2015; Walliman, 2011). Hence, this paper will use two types of data, primary and secondary.

The primary data is the *We Ate the Children Last* by Yann Martel. While the secondary data will be taken from journals, books, and websites that correlate with the research.

#### Critical Discourse Analysis

By definition, Critical Discourse Analysis is a critical analysis conducted to find the social imbalance within stories, articles, news, and other written ideas. Haryatmoko also states that critical discourse analysis, which is inspired by Marxism, is accomplished by examining the cultural aspects of social life, specifically when domination and exploitation are maintained by the manipulation of culture and technology (Haryatmoko, 2016).

In analyzing the social imbalance, Critical Discourse Analysis employs a steps analysis by Fairclough (Fairclough, 1995). The first step is to find and focus on the social imbalance within the text through the semiotics or linguistics aspects. Through that aspect, the social imbalance will be identified and analyzed until its lexical and semiotic levels. The second step is to find the obstacles preventing the handling of social imbalance. The third one is to re-examine whether the social imbalance happens because society wants it to happen. In this step,

the writer needs to see the social imbalance critically since, in some cases, the social imbalance manages to flourish in society because it benefits them. After analyzing the social imbalance, obstacles, and society's perspective, the last step is to accommodate those problems through solutions. The solutions are required to be as specific and objective as possible since that is characteristic of Critical Discourse Analysis, which is taking a moral responsibility (Haryatmoko, 2016)

## Theoretical Framework

### Transitivity Theory

Transitivity, by definition, is a theory that aims to identify the meaning and relationship between the grammatical features and the subject within the text. Another definition by Hopper mentions that transitivity is a 'global property' of an entire clause that carries the idea of the agent (the subject) to the patient (another subject) (Hopper & Thompson, 2008). Therefore, transitivity is a system that aims to carry the meaning of a clause by identifying the verb and the participants.

The idea of transitivity that carries the meaning of a clause is divided into six processes of meaning, three of which are the main processes in the English Transitivity System – Material, Mental, and Relational Processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The material process refers to verbs that show whether the subject or an event is happening (being created), creating, changing, doing, or acting something. The mental process, on the other hand, refers to verbs that reflect the subject's action that relates to their mental or consciousness, such as seeing, thinking, and feeling. Furthermore, the last process is the relation process, which refers to verbs that portray the event or subject's possessions as having an attribute, identity, or symbolizing something.

Thus, by finding these three main transitive processes, the article *We Ate the Children Last* will be broken down and analyzed to discover which process dominates and influences the social imbalance within the story.

## Findings and Discussion

### A. Transitivity Theory

In this section, the clauses within the article *We Ate the Children Last* will be selected and organized using Halliday's transitivity processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). There are three processes of meaning:

#### 1. Material Process

The material process is a process that involves physical actions – for example, running, crying, and others and the participant is the perpetrator of the action – **Actor** is the first participant, while **Goal** refers to the second one.

No	Clauses	Participant (Actor)
1	He finally <b>confessed</b> that he went out and picked at garbage.	He (Patient D)
2	Regulatory approval <b>came</b> swiftly.	The Government (Indirect)
3	A cleverly orchestrated campaign of petitions and protests – “Malnutrition: zéro! Déficit: zéro! “... easily <b>overcame</b> the hesitations of the government.	A cleverly orchestrated campaign of petition and protests

4	The government <b>reacted</b> swiftly.	The Government
5	The army <b>descended</b> upon everyone of the operated, without discrimination between the law-abiding and the criminal.	The Army
6	The police <b>raided</b> their offices and only a handful copies <b>escaped</b> destructions.	The Police
7	Internment camps <b>were</b> set up, nearly always in a small, remote towns....	The Government (Indirect)

Based on the table above, the first material process (1) represents a side effect of changing patient D's organs using a pig's digestive system. Later on, in the following examples (2-3), the society ends up believing the government and having the same side effect as Patient D, resulting in chaos within the society and profit for the government because they do not need to pay attention to the poor people. To make matters worse, as it gets closer to the end of the story, it becomes more evident in the last four examples (4-7) that the government decides to use its other subordinates (again) and misuse its power to shut down those against them by putting them in concentration camps. Therefore, the material processes portray the government as the trickster and the tyrant that sets up its citizens and kills them for its own advantage.

## 2. Mental Process

Differentiating from the Material process, which invests more in physical actions as the determinant, the Mental process refers to the actions that require more mental ability or consciousness. Moreover, the participant (human) in this process is called a **Senser**.

No	Clauses	Senser
1	...since he no longer <b>felt</b> the need for much sleep and <b>was</b> embarrassed about his diet.	He (Patient D)
2	The medical team would have been <b>concerned</b> except .... And further test revealed... that the man was bursting with good health.	The medical team

Based on the first example of Mental Process, Patient D, the cancer survivor, is slowly developing a new diet – eating garbage after using the pig's digestive system to replace his cancer-affected organs. Although receiving such a staggering achievement in his health after the new diet, this new diet causes him to feel ashamed of himself because the only thing that satisfies him as a human being is not food anymore, rather than garbage or rotten food.

Meanwhile, the second example represents the consciousness of the medical team, the perpetrator of this research, which rejects the idea that there is a side effect and the need to do further research on this experiment. Moreover, according to Bustos and Mcquade, the consciousness of the medical team can also be described as the government's consciousness since the government is in control of this particular instrument (Bustos & Mcquade, 2006).

Therefore, the mental processes display the embarrassment within patient D toward his current state and the ignorance of the government in dealing with the anomaly of the gut revolution experiment.

### 3. Relational Process

The relational process is a process of meaning that functions to identify, classify, or symbolize the clause whether it has the identity, attribute, or symbol – the subject or the participant carries these three is called a **Carrier** or **Identifier/Tokens**.

Clauses	Carrier
The procedure <b>caught</b> on among <b>the young and the bohemian, the chic, the radical</b> , among all those who wanted a change in their lives.	The procedure

Based on the example above, the relational process represents the influence of the gut revolution in affecting other people besides the sick ones within the society, resulting in the experiment being used more in the wrong way by the society and without restrictions from the government.

Therefore, based on the overall findings of the processes above, it is shown that the Material process appears more frequently than the other two processes, signifying that the social imbalance in the article *We Ate Children Last* is mostly conducted through the action of the higher power, in this case, is the government.

#### B. The Four Steps Methodology by Norman Fairclough

After finishing the transitivity theory discussion and analysis in the previous part, the paper will proceed with the critical discourse analysis by using the four steps by Norman Fairclough. The analysis will be as follows:

#### Finding the Social Imbalance through Semiotic/Linguistics Aspects

This first step aims to find the social imbalance through semiotic/linguistic aspects within the short story, particularly in *We Ate the Children* article. Through close reading, transitivity findings, and discussion, it is concluded that the social imbalances are the government's misuse of power toward the approval of pig digestive system transplantation to humans even though it has drastic side effects and the annihilation solution of people with the negative side effects.

The first social imbalance is the government's misuse of its power in approving the pig digestive system as a health solution despite the side effects. The events start with patient D, a cancer survivor, who admits that there are side effects that happened to him after changing his organ to a pig digestive system, such as eating garbage, having little sleep time, and even feeling embarrassed about his own condition.

“He finally *confessed* that he went out and picked at garbage.” (Material Process)

“...since he no longer *felt* the need for much sleep and *was* embarrassed about his diet” (Mental Process)

However, despite having plenty of side effects, patient D manages to recover from his cancer. This anomaly leads the medical team or, indirectly, the government (Butos & Mcquade, 2006) to approve this research, even changing the chemotherapy used to cure the patient with cancer to the pig's digestive system despite knowing this intriguing fact about the gut revolution.

“The medical team would have been *concerned* except . . . , And further test revealed . . . that the man was bursting with good health.” (Material Process)

“Regulatory approval *came* swiftly.” (Material Process)

Soon, society notices and takes an interest in this new regulation from the government. This interest is growing bigger and bigger, to the point that it is becoming unattainable for them to keep, making them create a protest so the social problems, such as poverty and malnutrition, can disappear.

“A cleverly orchestrated campaign of petitions and protests – “Malnutrition: zéro! Déficit: zéro! “... easily *overcame* the hesitations of the government.” (Material process)

The government that knows the danger behind the gut revolution, instead of refusing or banning it, decides to approve the revolution while pretending to be the one who is concerned about its citizens. This creates the illusion of the government as an innocent party in the story.

The second social imbalance is the government’s misuse of power in covering its fault from society by shutting down the media and annihilating the pig-stomached people. This second social imbalance happens after the government approves the new regulator. From that moment, people who are sick and those who do not decide to exchange their organs into pigs’ digestive system.

“The procedure *caught* on among *the young* and *the bohemian, the chic, the radical*, among all those who wanted a change in their lives.” (Relational Process)

With all types of people in society changing their organs, the side effects start to affect the environment. Soon, the news of all of them eating garbage to the point that they begin eating older people is spreading widely. The government is left with no choice but to fix this problem. However, the solution is annihilating evidence from specific media, and the pig-stomached people are put in concentration camps and then killed.

“The army *descended* upon everyone of the operated, without discrimination between the law-abiding and the criminal.” (Material Process)

“The police *raided* their offices, and only a handful copies *escaped* destructions.” (Material Process)

“Internment camps *were* set up, nearly always in a small, remote towns . . . .” (Material Process)

Aside from the semiotic aspects above, there is an addition in terms of vocabulary. The use of words, such as astounding recovery (in the first paragraph), real achievement (in the second paragraph), healthy, and strong (in paragraph three) give the impressions of how well this experiment is. They put it in a way that sounds as if the experiment works for the particular patient D and will work the same for the other people. These words are used as the government’s attempt to persuade and trick society, through positive-sounding adjectives.

### **Identifications of the obstacles to handling the social imbalance**

In *We Ate the Children Last* article, the obstacle is the government’s suppressive nature. By the time the numbers of pig-stomached-people and missing people increased, added to the media involvement in protesting, rather than holding an urgent meeting on finding a solution to the problem, the government turned into a dictatorship-esque arrest spree. Instead of solving the problem, the government decided to give an ultimatum of power by exterminating the data from the media, arresting pig-stomached people along with law-abiding citizens, shipping

them to concentration camps, and immediately executing escapees.

### **Consider the social imbalance within the society or not**

We believe bandwagoning is the case for middle to upper-class supporters for the social imbalance. A study conducted to explain bandwagon behavior finds that the behavior stems from a psychological trait, which is the fear of missing out on a trend. Bandwagon behaviour operates with a noticeable tendency, which is: that the more luxurious and hyped a product or trend is advertised, the stronger it will develop the 'fear of missing out' in people who consume the advertisements (Kang, et al.). In the case of *We Ate the Children Last*, the transplantation trend has caught the attention of both the middle and upper class, creating this exact bandwagon behavior. These people do not see the transplantations as a survival necessity, they just saw it as a trend appearing within their society. Once this trend has garnered enough followers and is advertised in a luxurious enough way, the 'chic' and the 'bohemian' are eager to bandwagon. This vicious organ-replacing bandwagon behavior, though creating social imbalance, is used to maintain their social status (Kang & Ma, 2020).

Certainly, the poor need this social imbalance because food is scarce for them. Even if they have some food to eat, there is a chance that it is unhealthy food. By using the digestive system of pigs, the food that is unhealthy at first can be processed, now without costing their health. Even "better", they can scavenge food in garbage bins, reducing garbage problems, and lessening the need for the government to provide subsidized food.

Moreover, the middle class - the radical, chic, or middle to upper-class supporters, may benefit by using this to boost their social acknowledgment. In the world of social media, people can receive social recognition just by saying they support something. "I support this," "I hate that," and "my affiliation is with this party," are enough for an individual to be recognized and belong to a group. We believe bandwagoning is the case for middle to upper-class supporters for the social imbalance.

On the other hand, the government indeed receives the most benefits from the social imbalance within the society. The apparent one is from the economic perspective. Through the approval of the gut revolution, the government does not need to make and arrange allowance money or aid to the poor people, meaning that the tax money that is supposed to support the poor can be manipulated or corrupted. Therefore, obtaining money and saving time by arranging financial aid for the poor, are the reasons why the government supports the social imbalance to happen in the society.

### **The Solution**

What differentiates CDA from regular discourse analysis is that the former picks a stance and feels obligated to bear the moral burden to resolve the social imbalance. In the case of this dystopian article, the solution is by dramatic coup de' tat. The soft warning could have been the solution had the government not gone to drastic measures, such as arrest and execution. However, looking at the government's attitudes in allowing dangerous scientific practices, eliminating evidence from media, destroying facilities, and torturing and practicing genocide toward innocent citizens is beyond human measure. Therefore, at this point, the only resolution for the citizen can be achieved through the overthrow of the government.

In addition, if the coup de tat succeeds, the new government needs to create solutions to prevent the past from happening again – for instance, by learning and teaching the new

generation the history, starting from its cruelty to show the way to avoid/prevent the problem.

### Conclusion

Critical Discourse Analysis uses transitivity, and four-step analysis can identify the social imbalance in the *We Ate Children Last* article. The social imbalance is that the government proved to be the one who benefited from the experiment toward the poor. The benefit is the removal of expenses used for the poor without getting any social scrutinizes from society. Moreover, the government, as the highest power holder within the country instead of protecting the citizens, acted as the perpetrator in causing damages in a public place, destroying substantial evidence, and violating human rights. Therefore, using Critical Discourse Analysis in this particular story allows one to look into more significant and critical perspectives of the potential of how the government and society can become if the government is immoral and the society is less thoughtful in choosing their lifestyle.

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