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## Dystopian Vision and the Hope for Humanity: P.D. James' *The Children of Men*

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### **Abstract:**

P. D. James is best known for her detective novels and her creation of famous detective Adam Dalgliesh. Her novels are true and interesting explorations of moral and psychological complexities of her characters. Her novel *The Children of Men* is an insightful picture of futuristic looming end of humanity. The study aims at analyzing the dystopian vision of James' imagined world where the population is declining without the hope for future. The novel satirizes the prevailing socio-political conditions and the loss of moral faith that might lead human beings to a world without humanity. It reflects the devastating effects of man's over-reliance upon science and technology. James' profound faith in Christianity helped her to develop a great sense of morality and goodness of heart. Through her novel's imagined dystopian world she depicts the deep-rooted disillusionment at the loss of faith and hope.

**Keywords:** dystopian, disillusionment, infertility, reproduction, humanity, science and technology

### **Introduction:**

P. D. James (1920-2014) is one of the most significant and famous British detective novelists. She is often referred to as the queen of crime fiction and the doyenne of detective novelists. James, recipient of many awards and honors, wrote seventeen detective novels and two stand-alone novels which have been adapted for film and television. Though she started writing novels in the tradition of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Margery Allingham to fulfill her dreams of writing fiction and entertain the readers, she gave a new rise to the genre by experimenting with the form of mystery novels and adding a fine touch of realism to it. She regards writing detective fiction as imposing order and human justice on disorder and chaos. Her creation of the charming and intelligent Adam Dalgliesh- the most famous detective since Sherlock Holmes- has made her novels widely read and loved. At the same time, she is also very careful about the plot, setting and characterization in her novels. Unlike most of mystery writers, she is concerned not only with entertainment value or whodunit but also with what causes her characters to do it. Her novels are interesting and true explorations of moral and psychological complexities, hidden realities, ambitions and impulses of human heart and mind. By taking an innovative turn toward dystopian fiction with *The Children of Men* (1992), James portrays the claustrophobic and nightmarish atmosphere focusing on the themes of lack of future and mankind, reproduction, motherhood, hollow- sexual life, increasing will for power and control, over-reliance on science and technology and loss of moral faith resulting in alienation, chaos, death and disorder. It provides the reader with an insightful and discerning picture of futuristic looming end of humanity and reminds them of the real value of human life.

A dystopian work read as a morality tale contemplates the contemporary social flaws and injustices suggesting and warning us that such a landscape could be our future. In this way, *The Children of Men* is a brilliant example of dystopian literature as it satirizes the prevailing socio-political conditions, the loss of human faith and moral values which might lead human beings to a world without future. At the outset, there is no clear and certain definition of 'dystopia' as a literary genre. It has taken different forms according to the atmosphere of the narrative and the view point of the reader and critic. But all forms share one common feature of lack of individual freedom. The basic element of 20<sup>th</sup> century classical dystopian literature is based on the principle that it is impossible to maintain balance between socio-political institutions of totalitarian regimes and individual freedom. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are the best examples of the classical dystopian literature. Since the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, dystopian literature in English has witnessed a new turn with different aspects. After taking the place of totalitarian regimes, liberal democracies have given a new direction and columniation to social, economical, scientific and technological development which is in itself is utopian in nature. When these capitalist societies have given every possible means of comfort and safety, it is very difficult for its imperfect subjects to think and go outside of this materialistic and so-called perfect world that can give rise to dystopias. Now a man has become a post human material or capitalist body for his desire is everything. Now this artificial body is entirely and completely dependent upon technology for the fulfillment of desire. It has lost its essence of humanity for the sake of ultimate of will for the pleasure and prolonging of life. The dystopian literature since 1990s deals with the questions of human existence in midst of over-bearing capitalist systems. And this is the concept of human existence which has been dealt with by James in her novel *The Children of Men*.

The central premise of the novel is that no babies have been born since 1995, a year called 'Omega', owing to worldwide sterility in men, leading the human race to a quiet and peaceful end. But the cause of this worldwide illness is not known. The all possible efforts of the state, the advanced technology of the world and all the attempts of the scientists could not discover the cause. And, therefore, the cause of the mass-infertility seems to be non-human or other worldly. It turns Omega generation toward the superstitious beliefs and rituals. As a result, people turn to Xan Lyppiatt, the Warden of England, empowering him with the absolute power and authority over the state and it's mass for their desires and comfortable lives till they participate in mass-suicide ceremony called the Quietus.

The beginning of the novel with the news that "the last human being to be born on earth was killed in a pub brawl in a suburb of Buenos Aires, aged twenty-five, two months and twelve days" (4) gives a clear vision of bleak and gloomy atmosphere of the novel. It recalls James's previous detective novels but no much importance has been given to Ricardo's death. Though there is a thrilling suspense yet it remains unresolved unlike her previous mysteries as no one knows the cause of such worldwide catastrophe. The story is told in the forms of chapters divided between the diary entries of Theodore Theo, a historian at the University of Oxford and cousin to Xan Lyppiatt, the dictator and Warden of England and third person narration which gives its author time and occasion to comment on the contemporary society. At first, Theo seems to be an indifferent narrator, self-contained and detached person from others. He had no feelings for his now deceased parents, his wife, even for his fifteen months old daughter whom he accidentally killed in 1994. He is incapable of hope, without any hope and purpose in life. But as

he goes on to recount his memories truthfully and remorsefully and reflects on the dying world around him desperately, the readers think him to be an honest and capable of redemption. Theo observes the helplessness and deep-rooted disillusionment among people and says:

We are outraged and demoralized less by the impending end of our species, less even by our inability to discover the cause. Western science and Western medicine haven't prepared us for the magnitude and humiliation of this ultimate failure (5).

The humanity is coming to an end. Through her protagonist, James comments that the inadequacy and impotency felt by the governing bodies of each country and the inability of Western science to correct the problem have left people apathetic and impassive. In the absence of future generations and mankind, they have lost hope and faith.

Like a lecherous stud suddenly stricken with impotence, we are humiliated at the heart of our faith in ourselves. For all our knowledge, our intelligence, our power, we can no longer do what the animals do without thought (6).

Theo starts to record the last half of his life by keeping a journal which he knows, will hold no value any longer. This curious and mysterious catastrophe sets the human race in a mood of anxiety and despair. In James's imagined future without children, the population is declining. The childless women of reproductive age pour love and affection on doles. They dress them, buy expensive clothes for them and take them out for walks in prams. The toy industry was preoccupied with making doles in order to soothe the frustrated maternal desire of women. The 'Omegas', members of the last generations are completely self-centered, unruly and incurious. They are "incapable of human sympathy" and concerned only with their present delight and comfort. The failure of science to restore the lost fertility and to protect the frozen sperm in the laboratories from the attack of this monstrous disease has made Omegas feel tempted to old myths, superstitions and rituals in some countries.

The dystopian vision of power and control is depicted through state policies of the Warden. He and his advisory council promised to provide the citizens with a crime-free and stress-free environment by inventing cruel and restricted policies. In order to maintain the order and remove the violence and crime, he has constructed the Man Penal Colony. All the convicted criminals are severely punished by sending them permanently to the unsupervised brutal colony on the Isle of Man. A character defends this method of the Warden and says:

You must remember the 1990s, women afraid to walk the streets of their own cities, the rise in sexual violence and crime, old people self-imprisoned in their flats- some burned to death behind their bars- drunken hooligans ruining the peace of country towns, children as dangerous as their elders, no property safe if it was not protected with expensive burglar alarms (121).

Another worst policy of Xan and his council is "the Quietus"- an organized ceremony of mass-suicide. To get rid of the necessity to care for the elderly and the infirm, the government encourages them to take part in it by calling it voluntary and patriotic. Their survivors are paid rewards. They are herded into a boat that will sink in the sea as violins play. The restricted policies of Xan bear the witness to the destruction of society. The restricted immigration rules permit only the "Sojourners" or the young workers and slaves from the poor countries to do dirty

works and expelled from the country when they get too old any longer to work. The novel progresses from darkness to incipient light and from selfishness to selfless love, from disillusionment to hope. The other systems of Xan and his council are the regular and the compulsory fertility testing of healthy men and women of reproductive age and state-run porn shops. The persons with any kind of disability of mind and body are not considered healthy and thus, exempted from the fertility tasting. Theo recalls:

The world didn't give up hope until the generation born in 1995 reached sexual maturity. But when the testing was complete and not one of them could produce fertile sperm, we know that this was indeed the end of Homo-sapiens (9).

The first book of the novel, *Omega*, gives a detailed description of the terrible implications of declining population and adventures to save the human race. In classical dystopian literature, the reproductive technology is used by totalitarian regimes either to control the population or to promote it to produce the children as per the requirements of the state. But here the situation is different. In the novel, the best scientific and medical technology has proved unsuccessful to find a cause or a cure of the disease. The people have become disillusioned and abandoned their hope. They have begun to accept the unprecedented horrible situation. They are entirely dependent on science and technology. In order to achieve pleasure and comfort, they have given all rights to the Warden of England to rule over themselves and therefore, do not pay any heed to their individual identity, truth, humanity and morality. They have lost faith in God and religion. This places the man between human and non-human situation. They are not bothered about God's wrath and nature's indifference to their difficulties. Although the novel reflects the devastating effects of man's dependence upon technology and science for everything, it is concerned not only with science and technology. In James's view, the novel is a futuristic moral parable and in an interview in 1995, she herself stated that, "I don't think of it as science fiction, as some have claimed". She clearly tells about the idea of writing this novel when she said, "this time it was not a setting that inspired it, but the review of a scientific book drawing attention to a dramatic drop in the sperm count of Western men". Love and sex have become very complex and meaningless activities. Without the hope for future, people are only concerned with only comfort and pleasure which is what the Warden offers in return for his unquestioned power. James comments:

Sex has become among the least important of man's sensory pleasures...Sex totally divorced from procreation has become meaninglessly acrobatic...sex can still be a mutual comfort; It is seldom a mutual ecstasy. The government-sponsored porn-shops, the increasingly explicit literature, all the devices to stimulate desire- none has worked (146).

The dystopian picture of despotic dominion comes into light when Julian, a pregnant woman, one of the five members of a small group of revolutionaries known as "Five Fishes", has to suffer to save herself and her unborn child, who is the hope for future, from the surveillance, power and control of the government and intervention of medical technology. In fact the Book One 'Omega' prepares the ground for the real story and does not move until the Book Two 'Alpha'. The other members of Five Fishes group are Miriam (a midwife), Luke (the father of Julian's baby), and Rolf (Julian's husband) along with the presence of Theo who is asked by Julian and her group to reason with his cousin, Xan before they begin to protest against him. They are not ready to accept the infertility at any cost and instead draw attention to despotic

nature of the Warden's rule. The decreasing population witnesses a sharp decline in moral and religious beliefs. The degradation of religious faith has led to the demise to the Church of England. James rightly comments:

During the mid-1990s the recognized churches, particularly the Church of England, moved from the theology of sin and redemption to a less uncompromising doctrine: corporate social responsibility coupled with a sentimental humanism...Even to unbelievers like myself, the cross, stigma of the barbarism of officialdom man's ineluctable cruelty, has never been a comfortable symbol (59).

In the second book, as the story moves the readers find a ray of hope with the Five Fishes as they challenge the Xan's rule and aim at to establish individual freedom and justice in place of the brutal policies of the Warden. No elections in last fifteen years mark the end of democracy. As Rolf points out that "the Warden was elected when he first took power, but that was fifteen years ago. He has not called an election since. He claims to rule by people's will, but what he is is a despot and a tyrant" (67). The Warden has become absolute authority. The group wants the general election for a democratic government and social reforms. It is clearly described that the Warden's political control lies in the scientific and the technological development to which the people easily succumb to live out their days with pleasure and comfort. On the discovery that Julian is pregnant and holds the potential to save the mankind, the group has resolved to resist the Warden's government. Theo also takes up the responsibility of protecting the future of the human race. After witnessing the Quietus, pity strikes his heart. His growing love for Julian gives him a purpose in life and brings about his transformation from a selfish person to selfless person who sacrifices for others. He joins the Five Fishes group as they flee the state and protects Julian and her unborn baby from the dystopian forces of government and, thus, saves the mankind. James is a devout Anglican and through her she delivers the message that a world without children is a world without God. If there is no child, there is no hope, no future and no humanity. Julian and Luke, the priest are adamant believers in God and devout Christians. The revelation of her pregnancy and the birth of her child makes clear the true message of the story. The society has become over-relied on science for the solution of every problem in life and the people have lost their faith in spirit and love. Julian has a deformed hand for which she is not considered fit to breed the new generation. Luke "was exempt from testing. He had mild epilepsy as a child. Like Julian, Luke was a reject" (217). They evaded the fertility testing programme and therefore, Julian's pregnancy is not identified. God selects these two persons, who are disable and unfit to bear a child in the society's view, for the salvation of mankind. James herself hints at the source of its title and its hope when one of the members of the group sacrifices his life for Julian and the future and Theo reads a psalm from the Book of Common Prayer over him.

'Lord, thou hast our refuge: from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: thou art God from everlasting, and world without end. Thou turnst man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night' (238).

Thus, *The Children of Men* is a brilliant and compelling novel. At the end of the novel, the birth of a child has changed the world forever. James is always interested in exploring the themes of good and evil, faith and failure, love and selfishness. In fact the premise of the novel is an

allegory of lack of human hope and faith resulting in construction of oppressive and cruel policies by the self-absorbed government. The novel brings home the message that lack of hope and faith might lead the human race to a dystopian world and a world without future and humanity.

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