

Chromatic Tyranny: Exploring Totalitarianism in Jasper Fforde's *The Shades of Grey*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the notion of a dystopian hierarchy in an imagined society where all facets of existence are governed by a rigid repressive system. The elite group gets all kinds of privileges, whereas a large number of populations in the dystopian place are subjected to encountering terrible restrictions, exploitation, and slavery. The loss of individual freedom, disparities, and a pervasive sense of authoritarianism are often the result of hierarchy. The novel *Shades of Grey* illustrates the chromatic tyranny in the Chromatacia, an imagined society where hierarchy comes through the colour perception. It also depicts the ways in which totalitarian society, Chromatacia, upholds the manipulation of the data of the individuals who exist in such society. However, these totalitarian tyrannies lead to psychological and social effects on people, and however, it emphasises the themes of survival, compliance, and resistance. Hence, this novel, *Shades of Grey* (2009), attempts to show an in-depth analysis of a Chromatic tyranny, and it illustrates the implications of prevailing debates on power, governance, and human rights through the novel's characters effectively.

Keywords: Exploitation, Slavery, Capitalism, Hierarchy, Power and Authoritarianism.

In 1619, the slaves were brought to Jamestown, North America. Later, they sold to the Americans and other white people as slaves. Later, the Americans and Europeans used the black people for their own purposes. According to the whites, black people are savage, uneducated, ugly, and innocent. As a result, they used them for cultivation, plantations, and other personal works. This is how the discrimination rooted among the eastern people. Those who were called slaves by the eastern people had no choice but to leave their family and work under the white people till their last breath. Moreover, they intruded and occupied the black people's lands and utilised the sources abundantly by establishing the colonization. However, the emergence of the anti-slavery movement effectively brought about the revolution globally. Though many movements and revolutions came out in the previous centuries, discrimination exists in the form of colour, complexion, status, class category, hierarchy, power, politics, and other impacts of globalisation. But *Shades of Grey* expresses the dystopian setting in the speculative fiction in which the colour is the predominant concept of this novel that discriminates through one's visualisation of seeing colours. Based on the colour, they discriminate. *Shades of Grey* is a contemporary dystopian novel that was published in 2009 by the British novelist Jasper Fforde. He describes the speculative dystopian place that sets in future dystopian place called Chromatacia in England. Munsell is the founder and creator of the imagined dystopia, Chromatacia. This place establishes with so many ideologies and constrained laws that have to be followed by people except the elite classes.

The hierarchy is based on the colours that you can see, and visual colour is an obsession of the population, to the point where you want everything in your life to be brightly coloured. It's a colour-based economy, and it's severely localised. If you can see purple, then you'll be at the top of the stack; if you can see red, you're at the bottom of the stack.

That is how the hierarchy of the whole system works. If you can't see any colour at all, you're an achromatic, a faceless drone of the collective. (WalkerWords 1)

Colour perception is the prime element in this novel, in which those who are able to see the high colours in Chromatacia are treated with great respect and by many. Those who see the colour violet, on the other hand, are said to be the highest-ranking individuals. But the lowest socioeconomic class is made up of people who predominantly see Grey and Red. In the social-political system in Chromatacia, those who perceive Grey and Red are there in the bottom, who do not get any privileges, as the highest have much. In terms of the social-political system in Chromatacia, those who perceive Grey and Red are at the bottom, which do not even get any privileges, as the highest have much. There is a hierarchy of colours that are ranked from highest to lowest. The hierarchy is violet, blue, yellow, green, orange, red, and grey. This is how the social hierarchy discriminates with the colours.

The perception of colours in Chromatacia has a high impact on people's health as well as their well-being. Furthermore, different hues have different medicinal consequences for the people in the nation. In Chromatacia, doctors are called swatchmen. Based on the hierarchy of seeing the colours, the doctors also cure the patients. The shades of colour dominate the entire nation. Shanmugi explains about the, "The term totalitarian has become meaning to a single government with repressive power over its citizens". (Shanmugi 2050) and that ruins the individuality's freedom extremely.

Eddie Russett is the protagonist of this novel. He is a young boy who, at the age of twenty, lives in Chromatacia. Though he is young, he is able to sense the unusual environment around him that keeps him feeling intolerable. The system of Chromatacia suffocates the entire

population in the society except the elites. Russett is Eddie's father, who is a swatchman and brings Eddie to the city known as East Carmine to work along with him. There, his assignment is to survey the East Carmine people's population with the most concern.

Jane is another character who belongs to the lowest category perception, Grey. She frequently creates a kind of conflict with anyone who likes to interact with her. Eddie falls in love with her despite knowing she belongs to Grey. "Eddie meets a Grey girl named Jane who apparently has no problem treating Eddie (who with his slight color perception merits a much higher class rating than she) with no respect whatsoever. He's quite captivated by her, but has to catch his train and so is prevented from pursuing her" (Wood 2).

Being a Swatchman in East Carmine, Eddie's father gains such respect from Greys despite the prejudiced tyranny of Chromatacia. In the world press, it denotes the role of swatchman with dealing with colour perception for his profession as, "The swatchman is a kind of healer who uses color to help people overcome all sorts of health problems, and the right color can cure impotence or trigger ovulation. In addition, color can be used as a drug, can be addictive and even deadly. Color also represents the ultimate commodity in a world" (3)

Fforde explains through Eddie about the truth of the political system and the power structure of Chromatacia. He also finds out that those individuals who are unfit in Chromatacia will be transported to the Emerald City, where they expect to be obeyed as the Chromatacia government expects. The people who are climbed to stay in Emerald City have to stay there for a long time to refine them as the Chromatacia government expects. If they fail to do so, they will be punished and executed severely. Knowing these constraints from this, Eddie feels pity, and he wants to break such injustice against the innocents. But the irony is, Eddie is forced to work

under the governmental structure called the Colour Control Agency, although he never wants to work and live such a life as a Colour Control Agent. Being an agent in such a mass agency, he cannot speak out as he wants to. In order to maintain such colour complications, he is assigned to such a position. “Nobody is able to see more than one color” (Hammond 4).

Instead of working as an agent, he discovers real happiness by helping the Grey people who live in the city of East Carmine. More than that, he is aware of Jane’s social order in Chromatacia; rather, he cares for and respects her passionately. But developing this kind of relationship as a colour control agent makes a big difficulty for both in the society. Jane knows that things are not always as it seems in her surroundings. So she insists Eddie stay away from her. Realising the true boundaries with East Carmine Grey people in Chromatacia, Eddie wants to create a revolutionary society with the aim of removing such brutality.

Fforde employs first-person and third-person narration in this novel. The two narrations explain the entire plot in the most prudent way. After knowing that the political system is the obstacle to Eddie and Jane's attachment, Eddie states, “I found Jane too, or perhaps she found me. It doesn’t really matter. We found each other. And although she was Grey and I was Red, we shared a common thirst for justice that transcended Chromatic politics” (Fforde 1). The above lines indicate that he does not care about the politics of Chromatacia, which interrupts his love for Jane.

The chronological lines of prejudice are explained by Eddie. He feels pity for the place where, “rules regarding seat plans in ‘non-hue specific’ venues, the guests had unconsciously divided the room along strictly Chromatic lines. The on Ultraviolet was respectfully given a table all to himself, and several Greys stood at the door” (Fforde 3). The highest category of the

colour is ultra violet in the chromatic lines, who have the priority everything in the nation. The Grey people in Chromatacia have to wait for the Violets to get all the privileges, even in festivals. The Greys are, “waiting patiently for an empty table, even though there were places available” (3). The above lines indicate the pathetic conditions of the Greys, who have no choice but to wait until the elite groups enjoy the privileges abundantly. According to the chronographic scale, Eddie’s colour red itself is also considered by the authorities as, “lower in the Chromatic scale” (Fforde 3). For marriage, the colour category matters a lot. In a non-hierarchical order, people are not allowed to marry. The examples are, “(Yellow/Purple, Red/Green, and Orange/Blue” (Fforde27). “In Chromatacia, marriages are based not on affection (with a few eccentric exceptions) but on your mate’s potential to improve your offspring’s colour perception. The greater your perception, the more valuable a commodity you become and enterprising individuals, like the aforementioned” (Clare 2)

The authorities in Chromatacia emphasise and make the people believe that the given rules are unbreakable, and if they break, they will face death as a consequence. In Chromatacia, paying extra for goods is prohibited and punishable by fines. They uphold a rulebook that outlines societal norms for what is right and what is wrong. Only those who see seventy percent of the violet colour qualify to enjoy the prefects there. This novel has a coming-of-age setting that shows Eddie, a young boy’s observation and his constant efforts to change the society, which is free from colour control. “The plot itself is, so far at least, a fairly standard coming-of-age story, with hints of growing rebellion on the part of the protagonist, Eddie Russet. Indeed it's Eddie's increasing questioning of the society around him that introduces us to much of the history and social structure of his world” (Daz 2).

In East Carmine, they maintain a register note in which Eddie and his father have to write down the colours they see while checking the people for medical purposes. Eddie states, “We signed the village after that. Names, parents, postcode, feedback, merit-tally, and how much of what colour we could see Dad filled in his as ‘Red: 50.23%, and I marked mine as ‘Untested’” (Fforde 74). The most critical point is that imaginative thought is deemed highly dangerous in one’s life. But the people who see yellow are granted the privileges to some extent. Dominant colours like purple, blue, green, yellow, and orange are ranked better than the other two. In Chromatacia, a totalitarian system is not considered just value with colours but as well as the sense they have. Chakraborty states in his article regarding the totalitarian characteristics as, “Totalitarian regimes are aggressively nationalistic and implement law ruthlessly. They are comfortable in seclusion, as they are scared of infiltration of liberal thoughts” (2).

Though these types of speculative fiction may seem implausible to readers, it contains numerous underlying truths about politics and its powerful structures in real life. Fforde introduces Eddie, and the incidents around him are helpful to the readers who gradually understand Chromatacia in a better way. The second half of the novel shifts to a more thrilling and dramatic quest to retrieve colours from Munsell. The concept of the individuals’ ability to perceive colours is highly innovative in this novel, which keeps on remaining with the readers regarding the discrimination from various perspectives. Moreover, the writer’s creativity in exploring this concept enriches the plot with the chromatic scale of classification. Senutrak says, “In *Shades of Grey*, the creation of social order by means of classification is applied through a chromatic scale which is a hierarchical order of the people formed by their colour perceptions. Not only the order but also the behaviours, respect, and speech are all shaped by the hierarchy of colours” (76).

Eddie feels insecure about Chromatacia's politics. He finds himself voiceless and questions the true purpose behind his assignment to East Carmine. The absurd laws of this colourocratic society control the populace in an arrogant way, but he hates and brings up such revolutions through his position as a colour control agent. Chromatacia's oppressive government divides its citizens into categories of castes and classes based on traits, creating a loveless society where misfit citizens face certain death. Jane, a Grey from the lowest caste, is a rebel who disregards Eddie's love and punishes him both mentally and physically whenever he interrupts her path constantly.

There is a Colortocracy in place and it ensures that everybody is kept in their right place. Purples (those that can see, well, purple) are at an almost religious position and Greys are of such little importance that they don't even have to follow the Law of Munsell, the man that instated the Colortocracy after the Something That Happened. All of this is to say that it's kind of like a typical utopia/dystopia story like 1984, A Brave New World or Brazil. Everything seems pleasant at the beginning but the reader slowly learns about the way the world works and that it may be more sinister than we initially thought.(Thomson 1)

Shades of Grey is submerged in politics, where the political structure crushes the people's dreams. In Chromatacia, people must believe that Munsell's laws are flawless and comprehensive. As a red, Eddie Russett understands his position in the social hierarchy even though he tries to change better. But his family's plan is to marry him off with the Oxblood family, which will improve his social position in a better way. However, he develops feelings for Jane, who is considered a lowly Grey. Eddie begins to understand how this world operates only with order, not considering the humanity of the lowest people too. People with lower colours are

responsible for the actual care and respect than the others. Eddie feels, “The lower colours had a duty to care to see that those of the very highest hues came to no harm” (Fforde 356).

Fforde’s imagination integrates a political structure that characterises the systemic obscurity and pseudo-equalitarianism. In *Shades of Grey*, Jasper Through first-person narration, he effectively conveys the protagonist’s mindset in the beginning by stating Eddie’s observation on this society, which is something peculiar and inconvenient to him. “I had discovered something that no amount of merits can buy you: the truth. Not the *whole* truth, but a pretty part of it. And that’s why this was all frightfully inconvenient. I wouldn’t get to do anything with it. And this truth was too big and too terrible to ignore. Still, at least I’d held it in my hands for a full hour, and understood what it meant” (Fforde 01).

According to the guidelines of Chromatacia, the severe political structure and existential conflicts recognise the role of Eddie in social orders. “The wonderful thing about *Shades of Grey* is the scathing social commentary, not only of the Chromatacia” (Stephiedror 3), but the entire contemporary society. The author’s idea brings up a kind of warning to society that one should be aware of their government and corporations’s totalitarian setup. Further Fforde describes the hierarchical colour positions in the following lines:

Colour perception was notoriously subjective and the very human vagaries of deceit, hyper-bole and self-delusion all conspired to make pre-test claims pretty much worthless. No one could cheat the Colourman and the colour test. What you got was what you were, forever. Your life, career and social standing decided right there and then, and all worrisome life uncertainties eradicated forever. You knew who you were, what you would do, where you would go, and what was expected of you. In return, you simply

accepted your position within the Colourtocracy, and assiduously followed the Rulebook. Your life was mapped. (26)

In Chromatacia, those who see grey in the hierarchy are required to work overtime, even though they resist. Because the other highest colours believe that the overtime is suitable for only those who come under the lowest category. Next to Grey, Reds is subsequently the lowest in the hierarchy, who also gets excessive work in Chromatic companies and other organisations maintained by Chromatacia:

Literature, over the ages, has been influenced by the psychologies of people living in changing times. That is how literature is classified into various genres. In Dystopian fiction, the opposite is the portrayal of a setting that completely disagrees with the author's ethos and is portrayed as having various attributes that readers often find to be characteristic of that which they would like to avoid in reality, or dystopia. Both utopias and dystopias are commonly found in science fiction and other speculative fiction genres, and arguably are by definition a type of speculative fiction. (Madhusudana 88)

Jasper Fforde skillfully creates chromatic tyranny with dystopian characteristics that appear effectively in this novel, *Shades of Grey*. The strict social structures and rigid rules govern every aspect of the existence of the people in Chromatacia. Fforde examines the significant effects of totalitarian rule via the Chromatacia, demonstrating how such systems suffocate the uniqueness, creativity, and freedom of the individuals. The journey of the protagonist demonstrates the observing effects of dehumanising the inability of seeing the highest colours, which places racial position and the lack of individual worth. Ultimately, this novel is an eye-opener for the readers who have to know the totalitarian rules. As Eddie Russett

makes his way through this colour-coded regulation, the readers get to know the perils of unbridled power and how they should be aware of such settings. Thus, Fforde warns the readers of the widespread impact of authoritarianism with the hierarchical conflicts.

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