

## Dystopian Society in Ryan Gattis' Novel "Kung Fu High School"

Lalu Muh Lauhim Mahfuz<sup>1</sup>, Laksmi Ady Kusumoriny<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Pamulang

<sup>2</sup>dosen007722@unpam.ac.id

### Abstract

*The study is entitled "Dystopian Society depicted in The Novel Kung Fu High School by Ryan Gattis." This novel tells the story of a school controlled by a drug kingpin. Jen B and Jimmy Chang as the main characters struggle to survive in the deadly situations created in a dystopian society. This study focuses on how is dystopian society depicted and how the main characters survive in dystopian society reflected in Kung Fu High School. The study used qualitative method and a theory of dystopian literature by Booker (1994). As the results, the study found that dystopian society is totalitarian regime that control the people into worst and chaotic situation, violence and dehumanization that exist in everyday life, system of capitalist that giving powerfull control into middle-upper class, and pessimism in the mentality of this society. Therefore, the main characters survive by againts the oppressive power or totalitarian.*

**Keywords:** *Dystopian, pessimism, survive, totalitarian.*

### A. Introduction

Social issues are challenges that arise within society, impacting its values and moral fabric. These issues have significant repercussions not only on individuals but also on the broader social environment. Social issues are often driven by lifestyles that conflict with established moral standards, leading to social discomfort and a decline in welfare. As Wilkerson (2022) notes, a social issue pertains to a concern or problem connected to larger societal challenges, affecting the community as a whole. Society typically aspires to a utopian ideal characterized by peace, safety, and prosperity, while the opposite—a dystopian society—is marked by chaos, disorder, and despair.

A dystopian society, often depicted in science fiction and fantasy literature, portrays a nightmarish, hypothetical world where humanity is dehumanized and people lead lives filled with fear. According to Vecchione (2021), a dystopia can be defined as an imaginative depiction of a "very bad place," as opposed to a utopia, which represents an ideal, peaceful society. Dystopian societies are typically governed by totalitarian regimes, leading to societal depravity and moral decay. Common characteristics of such societies include totalitarianism, violence, capitalism, and pessimism, which collectively erode societal morals. Although dystopia is a fictional construct, it serves as a warning, highlighting the dangers of bad governance and societal neglect (Shames & Atchison, 2019).

Dystopian themes are prevalent in literature and media, such as Ayn Rand's "Anthem," Lois Lowry's "The Giver," Suzanne Collins' "Hunger Games" trilogy, and George Orwell's "1984." These works often include fantastical elements that accentuate the brutality and conflict between characters and society. Supernatural powers frequently play a significant role in these narratives, adding a layer of complexity to the dystopian setting. However, the characteristics of a dystopian society can also be observed in real-world scenarios, such as in war-torn countries where hunger, insecurity, and mass death prevail. Poor public morals can similarly create dystopian-like conditions, such as high bullying rates in European schools, leading to toxic social environments.

This study aims to analyze the depiction of dystopian society in a novel, drawing on three related studies for reference: Lalitya (2014), Damayanti (2021), and Kurnia (2017).

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Lalitya (2014) from Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia explored dystopian transformations and character construction in Lauren Oliver's "Delirium." The study utilized descriptive text analysis and Rimmon-Kenan's (1983) narrative theory to examine the protagonist, Lena, and the influence of dystopian elements on her characterization. The findings highlighted how Lena's characterization is shaped by the dystopian atmosphere and character interactions, yielding both positive and negative impacts.

Damayanti (2021) analyzed dystopian features in Margaret Atwood's "Oryx and Crake" in the "Journal Passage Vol 10, No 1 (2022)." Using a sociological approach and Barnett & Caine's (2005) qualitative method, the study identified dystopian characteristics such as a hopeless setting, citizen uprisings, and man-made disasters like overpopulation and genetic engineering. The protagonist's frequent questioning of societal and political norms was also a key finding.

Kurnia (2017) from UIN Sunan Gunung Djati examined dystopian society in Neal Shusterman's "Unwind." Employing structuralism and Terri Chung's (2013) dystopian theory, the study analyzed the survival theme within the narrative. The results revealed the dystopian characteristics and main conflicts centered around the value of children's lives and their struggle for survival.

This study shares similarities with the aforementioned studies in its focus on dystopian themes, including socio-political issues, moral values, and survival. However, it differs in the theoretical framework and novel analyzed, leading to unique analytical points and findings. This study employs M. Keith Booker's (1994) dystopian literature theory to examine how dystopian society is depicted in "Kung Fu High School" and how the main characters navigate this society. Booker's work provides a comprehensive framework for understanding dystopian literature, facilitating a thorough analysis of the selected issues.

## B. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which is well-suited to understanding the issue of dystopian society as depicted in literature. According to Kim (2017), qualitative descriptive research generates data that describe the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences' from a subjective perspective. This approach aligns with constructionism and critical theories, using interpretative and naturalistic methods (Lincoln, 2017). The goal is to provide a clear and comprehensible analysis of the dystopian elements in the novel "Kung Fu High School" by Ryan Gattis.

The primary data source for this study is the novel "Kung Fu High School" by Ryan Gattis. This novel is categorized as a dystopian work, addressing social problems within a school environment, making it an appropriate object of analysis for the issue of dystopian society. Data were collected in the form of dialogues and narrations from the novel. To support the primary data, additional information was gathered from relevant journals and articles.

The data collection process involved the following steps:

- 1) Reading the Novel: The novel was read multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of the story and its themes.
- 2) Identifying Relevant Content: Dialogues and narrations pertinent to the issues of dystopian society were identified.
- 3) Highlighting Quotations: Key quotations that illustrate dystopian themes were highlighted and marked for easy reference.
- 4) Notetaking: Brief notes were taken and compiled into a temporary file to organize the data.
- 5) Editing and Finalizing Data: The data were edited to ensure accuracy and relevance, resulting in a collection of essential quotes and references.

The data collected were analyzed using M. Keith Booker's (1994) dystopian literature theory. This theoretical framework provides a structured approach to examining the characteristics and themes of

dystopian societies. The analysis process was systematic and structured to ensure that the data aligned with the theoretical framework. To deepen the understanding of the text, various references were used to explain the significance of specific diction and expressions in the novel. Each piece of data was evaluated for its relevance and appropriateness to the study's objectives. The findings were then synthesized to draw meaningful conclusions about the depiction of dystopian society in "Kung Fu High School." The results of this study were derived through careful analysis and interpretation of the collected data, supported by relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. The findings provide insights into the dystopian elements present in the novel and their implications for understanding social issues within a fictional context.

## C. Findings and Discussion

### 1. Dystopian Society in Kung Fu High School

Dystopian society is an imagined world or society with the theme of cultural and moral destruction caused by inappropriate socio-political conditions. Therefore, a dystopian has the opposite of what the people expect in a utopian society. A dystopian society which described as a chaotic and messy socio-political condition are influenced by several factors. The author describes some of these categories equipped with some data or quotations as evidence of analysis. The following categories which described as the dystopian society are depicted below.

### 2. Totalitarianism in School

Totalitarianism is a political system that does not allow opposition, and controls the population in an authoritarian way. In dystopian, the totalitarian regime usually carry out acts of intolerance towards differences by persecuting certain marginalized groups. The orders and rules given are absolute and cannot be disputed. Therefore, totalitarian power can control the rules according to its own interests and has no limits.

Teacher there to protect you? Yeah, right. Nobody cared about the teachers. Either they were passionate believers in the power of teaching to change the disenchanting youth, who got in nice cars at the end of the day and went back to cookie-cutter houses in the suburbs, or they were deadbeats, ex-cons who slipped through the cracks with out a background check. And all of'em were on Ridley's payroll. (Kung Fu High School, p.14)

This quotation reveals the totalitarian issue in this literary work. In every sentences the author emphasizes that all groups have submitted to one absolute power. The sentence '*Nobody cared about the teacher*' represents school officials and administrators, the sentence '*who got in nice cars*' represents people from the upper middle social class, the word '*deadbeats*' which means loser or poor represents people from the lower class, and the word '*ex-cons*' which means former inmates represent a group of criminals. All of these social groups and classes are under the authority of one person, in accordance with the phrase '*And all of'em were on Ridley's payroll*' which means all these groups are subject to Ridley's authority.

Even Dermody was on the far end of the quad with Cap'n Joe, just standing still and observing like they were Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. They knew this was Ridley's time. They wouldn't interfere with the circle. (Kung Fu High School, p.47)

This quotation belongs to the totalitarian issue which directly reflects Ridley's power. Dermody as the principal and Cap'n Joe as his bodyguard, they could only stay silent and watch from afar '*just standing still and observing*', unable to prevent the actions of Ridley and his group '*They wouldn't interfere with the circle*'. Ridley's actions that no one could prevent were a form of totalitarian power.

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Whatever a totalitarian does must not be rejected or resisted, because the power and orders possessed are absolute.

Lawyers, judges, media? you aren't getting it yet, are you? Everyone was in on it. Everyone. (Kung Fu High School, p.15)

The quotation above illustrates the power possessed by a totalitarian system, every party that should have the power to uphold justice and provide actual information as mentioned in the quote '*Lawyers, judges, media*', all are under totalitarian control. This information is proven in the statement '*Everyone was in on it*' which means that all parties are under one command that controls it, which is the totalitarian regime controlled by Ridley. All the important parts are under his command, so his strength is getting stronger and unstoppable. This is the basis for the establishment of an absolute totalitarian power that can control everything.

Class dismissed," he said. Didn't even look up. Everyone left too, fast. The teacher didn't blink, just packed up her little folders, put them in her bag, and walked straight to the teachers' lounge to have a cigarette. She knew what was good for her. (Kung Fu High School, p.90)

This quotation shows the totalitarian issue that occur around the dystopia environment. The words '*Class dismissed*' shows that Ridley is able to make absolute orders directly no need for bureaucratic or organizational procedural rules. He has total control. The undeniable power possessed by Ridley makes everyone afraid, this can be seen in the words '*Everyone left too, fast.*' It is how totalitarian rulers behave in controlling everyone. The words '*She knew what was good for her.*' which means obeying Ridley as a totalitarian regime is a way to save oneself, it is implied that if there is rejection or resistance, then the risk will be very dangerous.

Because I can," Dermody said it loud, "because nobody's going to miss a bunch of poor gang kids that would be better off in jail or dead anyway. So go ahead and do it, Joe. I want to see this."

"No, don't do it!" Melinda shouted but didn't move. The shotgun was still pointed at her. (Kung Fu High School, p.257)

In the word '*Because I can.*' which means Dermody is able to do whatever he wants, reflecting the totalitarian issue by using violent repression. This character also easily decides that no one will oppose his decision to kill '*nobody's going to miss a bunch of poor gang kids*' this quote strengthens the totalitarian power that occurs in the story. In the words '*that would be better off in jail or dead anyway*' explains that this totalitarian power has no rule of law to obey, oppression and even killing can be done. According to the theory used, this totalitarian way does not accept opposition and rejection, its absolute power in making decisions. This fact is proven in the quote '*No, don't do it! Melinda shouted*' which meant a refusal was given, while Dermody didn't care at all '*The shotgun was still pointed at her.*' this is a picture of totalitarian issues in oppressing and controlling, both individuals and groups.

"You leave, and she lives. Stay, and everyone dies." He said it slow. (Kung Fu High School, p.261)

The quotation above reflected the totalitarian issue that occurs in the novel. In this quote, the writer uses short quote that prove the totalitarian issue clearly and definitely. In the words '*You leave, and she lives. Stay, and everyone dies.*' which means there are two choices that actually have the same impact, namely death, either to die now or later. In the words '*He said it slow.*' in narratively the author wanted to show the reader that this inhumane act, and this absolute power, was carried out without any hesitation or fear. A totalitarian has no empathy and tolerance in controlling or oppressing anyone. Everything can be done for personal gain and satisfaction. The quotation above reflected the issue of survive, the word '*business*' refers to the existence of the main characters's group, this is a protection

to survive from attacks by other groups, and this group must be managed and maintained *'needs to be handled.'* In the word *'Gear up good'* which means to be prepared for something that must be done, or to prepare someone to do something, the main character tries to get up from oppression and strengthen herself to fight. In the words *'we had a day to sort everything out.'* it is emphasized that this is a critical situation where the main characters must survive, because any mistake or delay in a dystopian society can be at risk of death, in accordance with the category of deadly situations that require one to survive.

We can't leave. Dad will die. Your mom will die. I'll die. The only one to survive will probably be badass you if you stopped being such a bitch and actually hit somebody. (Kung Fu High School, p.117)

In this quotation, the issue of survival is applied as a solution to being able to stay alive. As in the words *'The only one to survive will probably be badass you'* which means only a strong *'badass'* fighter can intimidate their opponent. In other words, the main characters has to act violently when surviving in dystopian society, as in the word *'hit somebody'* which means they also have to take physical violence to survive. This quote also shows the pessimism that is felt by the main characters, so that survival efforts are needed no matter what. In a dystopian society, remaining silent in a situation of oppression would end in death.

I said it as flat as I could: "The only thing to do now is keep playing the game. Ridley's playing to win. But we're playing not to lose." (Kung Fu High School, p.117)

The quotation above explains the issue of survival where the main characters tries to survive the social system used by the authorities. The words *'keep playing the game.'* is a symbol of the authoritarian system that takes place in the social environment. The words *'Ridley's playing to win'* explains that Ridley as an authoritarian ruler tries to have stronger absolute power, while the words *'we're playing not to lose.'* explains that the main characters tries to fight back just to survive. That's how the main characters survives in dystopian society, competing to pass all challenges, protect himself from all dangers, and fight against the oppressors who try to destroy and even kill him.

Dammit, Jimmy, you fuckin' heard him! How's he ever going to be punished? They're going to call him a hero for defending the school and he's fuckin' right." I was screaming the words, I didn't know where it came from, all of a sudden I couldn't stop the anger in me. "If Ridley's gone and he stays, the students'll be worse off than we ever were before! He's got to go! (Kung Fu High School, p.267)

This quotation reflected the issue of survive, the author shows the main characters's efforts to survive by againts the oppressive power. In the words *'How's he ever going to be punished?'* it is explained that oppressive power is not easy to punish and resist. However, the main characters has been oppressed and angry *'I couldn't stop the anger in me.'* this is the reason to survive and dare to fight. The dystopian condition will get worse if no resistance is given, and all factors that cause problems must be completely destroyed, as explained inn the quote *'If Ridley's gone and he stays, the students'll be worse off than we ever were before!'* Therefore, in the words *'He's got to go!'* which means that the source of the problems must be destroyed, the main characters decides to fight and stop the totalitarian power that controls the social life of society.

It was probably the right idea. Attacking first before they could attack us. Ridley would *probably* be halfway ready for us though. (Kung Fu High School, p.186)

In this quote, the issue of survival is directly explained as an idea that may become a solution in a dystopian society. In the words *'Attacking first before they could attack us.'* which means that the main characters tries to defeat totalitarian leaders who control society and social rules, this is also in accordance with the theory used that survival can be done by saving oneself from attacks or fighting opponents. In the quote *'Ridley would probably be halfway ready for us though.'* it is explained that

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the main characters tries to attack when the *enemy* is unprepared, getting rid of enemies in this way is certainly included in a survival strategy that can be done for self-safety.

These were kids I went to junior high school with. They all had their fucked-up stories, lives, hobbies, secret dreams, and families to go home to. They all wanted to survive just as much as I did. Too bad. (Kung Fu High School, p.212)

The quotation above reveals that the issue of survival occurs widely in a dystopian society. In the words '*They all had their fucked-up stories, lives, hobbies, secret dreams, and families to go home to.*' conveyed that dystopian people are also normal people who have families and human nature. In other words, the rude attitude shown is a response to the chaotic social conditions one lives in. In the words '*They all wanted to survive just as much as I did*' it is emphasized that people living in a dystopian world try to survive in their own way. Everyone is trying to survive in this unsafe, chaotic, and deadly social situation. This way of survival by violence is also a factor in the problem that is getting worse, everyone struggles in their own way without fair and firm rules. This situation is similar to the term known as mob rule, which means the fact or state of large groups of people acting without the consent of the government, authorities.

And she wanted to respond to Mr. Wilkes, start a conversation about how sometimes people more powerful *than* you can make the decision for you. They can take it away. Impose it on you. And then all you can do is choose survival in the only way possible: to fight. (Kung Fu High School, p.249)

This quotation reveals the issue of survival by explaining the reasons why everyone must fight to save themselves. In the words '*sometimes people more powerful than you can make the decision for you*' which means that the power can freely control the rules, and the weak must obey those rules, either individually or in groups. This fact is emphasized in the quote '*They can take it away. Impose it on you.*' which means that strong people are able to take whatever other people have, and can coerce anyone with oppression or violence. This *is* also related to the totalitarian issue where one of the factors causing the creation of a dystopian society is the control of absolute power. In the words '*And then all you can do is choose survival in the only way possible: to fight.*' which means that the only way to save yourself from a dystopian society is to fight for survival.

The analysis results of all the data above are different from the analysis results of other studies. Lalitya (2014) found that dystopian society constructed Lena's characterization, as the main character, through two factors; the atmosphere of dystopian transformations and constellation characters. The study concludes all factors are give *positive* and negative to Lena's characterization. While the results of this study conclude that there are four important social issues that create dystopia, and surviving this situation must be done by fighting against oppressive authorities. In other words, the dystopian issue described by the author uses a direct approach to existing social issues, and other studies are more related to issues presented through intrinsic elements of the story.

## D. Conclusion

The conclusion of the study of how is dystopian society depicted in novel '*Kung Fu High School*' and how the main characters survive in dystopian society has founded through data and analysis. Dystopian society depicted in the novel is caused by socio-political problems that have an impact on moral damage and human values. This issue raises many problems that make it complicated and difficult to solve. Many social lines and positions of governmental power have contributed to worsening the condition of society. Some of the most influential issues that lead into dystopian society are totalitarian, violence, capitalism, and pessimism. All these issues are used by the author in writing his novel to build dystopian in the story.

Furthermore, the writer concludes that the main characters can survive in a dystopian society by fighting againts the oppressive forces that disrupt his life. This conclusion is proven by some data or

quotations found in the novel. Based on the theory used by the writer, survival is a way to deal with oppression from totalitarian regimes that control the socio-political community. Therefore, the main characters can be free from the threat of the dystopian society after defeating the ruler of the dystopian society who caused all the damage and problems in the social environment. This study has carried out with a systematic analysis and equipped with data as valid evidence. The discussion is also written in detail and clearly. Therefore, the writer hope that this study is not only limited to academic discussions without positive impacts in real life. This study of dystopian society is expected to be a guide for readers to prevent the creation of bad social conditions in society. The issues that have been discussed need to be considered and anticipated from now on, so that they do not become serious problems in the future. This effort must be carried out and supported by all parties, because social problems are issues that are the main concern of society and affect all individuals or groups.

The writer has given his best in analyzing and explaining the study which analyzed according to the method and theory used. However, if there are any mistakes in the rules of writing or analysis, the writer invite anyone who wishes to provide suggestions or conduct a study on related issues. Hopefully, the result of this study can be used as learning or used as a reference for further studies that are better and more complete. Conducting a more in-depth study certainly makes it possible to find new facts that have not been discovered in this study. The writer suggest to the next writer who want to conduct a study on related issues to choose a literary work with different themes and conflicts, then using different theories or methods so that new issues and points of view can be found.

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