
**Exploring Dystopia through Textual and Visual Narratives of Appupen's
Legends of Halahala**

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Abstract:

This research paper provides a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the dystopian themes depicted in Appupen's graphic novel *Legends of Halahala*. By employing a multidimensional approach that integrates visual and textual elements, the paper seeks to unravel the profound artistic strategy used by the artist to communicate a compelling portrayal of a dystopian society. Through this analysis, the research aims to achieve several key objectives, including shedding light on the complex interplay of visual and textual storytelling, elucidating the thematic undercurrents that define the graphic novel, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the broader implications of dystopia within the medium of graphic storytelling. At its core, this research paper endeavors to unravel how *Legends of Halahala* harnesses the synergy of visual and textual understanding to immerse readers in a world characterized by desolation, oppression, and existential unease. By meticulously examining the graphic novel's visual imagery, the paper aims to decode the rich symbolism, allegorical motifs, and thematic nuances that collectively evoke a sense of disquiet and foreboding, thereby providing insights into the artistic techniques that underpin the portrayal of a dystopian reality. Integral to the intent of this research paper is the exploration of visual symbolism as a potent conduit for conveying the complexities of dystopia. By deconstructing the recurring motifs and visual signifiers present in *Legends of Halahala*, the paper seeks to unravel the deeper thematic undercurrents that permeate the narrative, inviting readers to contemplate the broader implications of societal decay, authoritarianism, and human resilience. Additionally, the deliberate use of color as a narrative device is a focal point of the analysis, aiming to illuminate how the juxtaposition of vibrant and subdued color palettes enriches the emotional resonance of the story, thereby enhancing the reader's immersion in the dystopian world crafted by the artist. This research paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dystopian narrative achievements of *Legends of Halahala* while emphasizing the broader implications of utilizing visual and textual narratives to communicate intricate socio-political messages inherent in graphic storytelling. Through this comprehensive analysis, the paper endeavors to offer a scholarly exploration of the graphic novel's thematic depth, visual intricacies, and narrative resonance, inviting further inquiry and critical discourse into the multifaceted portrayal of dystopia in contemporary graphic literature.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Dystopian Narrative technique.

Introduction:

Exploring Dystopia through Textual and Visual Narratives of Appupen's *Legends of Halahala*

Dystopia, according to the the Oxford University Dictionary, stands for “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible, as opposed to utopia”. Analogous to this definition, dystopian literature stands as a pivotal component within the literary landscape, offering insights into the prevalent traumas and adversities of contemporary society and is frequently nestled within the genres of science fiction. Dystopian chronicles convey a sense of melancholy, encapsulating the looming structure of foreboding doom rooted in the tumultuous experiences of the twentieth century and serving as poignant reflections on societal anxieties and existential concerns. The twentieth century, marked by exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the commodification of human experience, has laid a rich foundation for the exploration of dystopian themes within literature. These myriad experiences, alongside the resultant array of fictional storylines, have expanded the literary landscape, offering a fertile ground for the depiction and contemplation of dystopian accounts. The enduring popularity of dystopian literature spans over the centuries, indicating its sustained relevance to readers across generations. According to M. Keith Booker, “*The Machine Stops* and *Brave New World* are the great defining texts of the genre of dystopian fiction, both in [the] vividness of their engagement with real-world social and political issues and in the scope of their critique of the societies on which they focus” (Booker, 4). It plays a dual role of entertaining and serving a didactic purpose by making a stark critique of society. However, it is important to note that long before the advent of dystopia in fictional writing, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver Travels* introduced the ‘peculiarity’ that has since then become an inseparable thematic concern in dystopian plots and subplots. In *Gulliver's Travel*, peculiarity is defined as “being inhabited by dwarfs, giants, necromancers, mad scientists and the like. These lands are utopian as well as dystopian, but mainly they are absurd” (Madhusudana). The widening acceptance of comic books and graphic novels within literary studies is the hallmark of postmodernism, reflecting the ongoing fusion of various media and artistic expressions. Given that comic and graphic novels seamlessly blend text and visuals, they naturally lend themselves to this trend. Moreover, this phenomenon underscores the gradual erosion of the distinction between high and low art, as seen in the convergence of traditional literary forms with the emerging genre of comics and graphic novels (Baetens 2018). According to Jessica Lange in her work “The Shapes of Dystopia: Boundaries, Hybridity and the Politics of Power,” dystopia embodies the idealistic conflict between utopia and dystopia wherein exaggerated concepts of power and control proliferate to become central elements of the dystopian genre (Lange 17).

Graphic novels often center on anti-heroes, highlighting their complexities and flaws. They may also explore the absence of action to an extreme, delving into moments of

profound boredom. Furthermore, they frequently employ repetition, boredom, and uneventfulness thematically and visually, emphasizing the monotony and routine aspects of life (Schneider 2016). This paper will examine the role of graphic novels in illuminating the socio-political upheavals of the dystopian society. Jan Baetens' "Graphic Novels: Literature without Text?" explores how more and more graphic novels appear to have literary subtext." Likewise, *Legends of Halahala* employs visual storytelling to critique the absurdities of contemporary society. The interwoven relationship between utopia and dystopia underscores the central themes of power and control to delve into taboo subject matters and offer candid tales tackling similar themes (Pagliaro).

Skimming the dystopian narrative through the textless graphic *Legends of Halahala* (2017) by George Mathen, also known as Appupen, the reader is introduced to the experience of the visual text that relies solely on illustrations to enhance the reading experience further through visual storytelling. Appupen, similar to Ripley's articulation (2012), empowers us to decipher images within the context of *Legends of Halahala*, providing a nuanced interpretation within a medium devoid of textual expression, fostering exploration of profound ideas evoked by prominent visuals. This approach enables the medium to be scrutinized and comprehended, akin to written text. The dialogue within any society may be viewed as comprising elements of both negative and undesirable dystopia and idealistic utopia, suggesting the fact that hopeful, optimistic aspirations exist, as well as concerns and fears about the future. The dystopian graphic novel format has witnessed a notable evolution, with an increasing focus on the fusion of visual and textual narrative experiences. The effectiveness of a graphic novel hinges on its ability to convey dystopian information to the reader through nonverbal means of skill focussed on assessing specific abilities or competencies related to creating or analyzing graphic novels. The rubric of graphic novels opted by Appupen is visual storytelling, character design, panel layout, use of color, nonverbal communication, pacing, and overall narrative coherence. Each criterion has different levels of achievement, allowing a detailed assessment of Appupen's skills in graphic novel creation and analysis. Within this context, the storyline, plot, character, narrative structure, and visual interpretation are derived from within the complex and multifaceted society that reflects both the desire for the ideal society and the recognition of potential problems and challenges. This duality within societal discourse may stem from the diverse perspectives, values, and experiences of individuals. Many scholars and thinkers, beginning with Thomas More, have demonstrated the potential for utopia, whether understood as a literary genre, a political ideal, or an ideology, to also contain elements of dystopia. Conversely, dystopian works have shown the potential for utopian elements with a marked surge in the popularity of dystopian sequences of events, particularly with the turn of the millennium. This rise of apocalyptic and dystopian themes has permeated the global literary landscape, extending to movies, television, graphic novels, and video games, which have become increasingly significant markets for mass cultural production.

Appupen endeavors to convey a social commentary through visual allusion and by satirizing, highlighting, and criticizing the flaws and absurdities of the contemporary

dystopian global society, offering a unique and thought-provoking perspective on its characteristics and consequences. The writer creates the dystopian world of Halahala, a place filled with strange creatures, bizarre technology, and a complex social structure with the help of symbolism of the impending doom, the central theme in all these five stories. The dystopian narrative arc follows the journey of the characters as they navigate the oppressive and often nightmarish world of Halahala. The society is controlled by a powerful and corrupt regime, and the themes of inequality, surveillance, and the loss of individuality are represented through the stories in *Legends of Halahala*, a reflection of contemporary society. For example, the pun on the Roman god of erotic love, Cupid, mentioned in the 'Stupid Arrow,' but, unlike Cupid's arrow that romanticizes the act of falling in love, represents the dystopian symbol of resistance and rebellion. On a similar vein, the creator's artistic prowess is reflected in the clarity of artwork, depth of characters, and the intricacy of plot in the narrative of the dystopian story 'Oberian Dysphoria' as a nuanced allegorical framework that unfolds, delving into intricate themes of power dynamics, control mechanisms, the act of defiance, and an intricate interplay within relationships and can be viewed as a satire against the troupe of a heartbroken lover. The love is subverted through the term 'dysphoria,' which refers to the state of eternal sadness and general discomfort and symbolizes the story's protagonist, a violet alien-like creature, who after being parted from the lover, decides to burn the entire habitat which is a reminder of lost love to ashes exhibiting the characteristics of a postmodern fragmented narrative structure, disjointed events, surreal sequences, and metafictional characters. The abrupt shifts in perspective and surreal imagery contribute to the sense of disorientation and uncertainty. 'Oberian Dysphoria' offers a postmodern reinterpretation of cultural symbols and motifs such as skeleton-like structures, vultures, and dinosaurs, adding multiple layers of meaning to the text. These references in 'Oberian Dysphoria' create a network of connections with other texts and cultural contexts, inviting readers to interpret the narrative through multiple lenses like the self-awareness of the narrative, such as the purple creature entering the dinosaur through its ear, blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. Through the metanarrative of 'Oberian Dysphoria,' Appupen symbolizes the idyllic state of innocence and pleasure, the intrusion of reality, trauma, or the death drive, unresolved aggression, through the linear progression of the cohabitation and collecting of flowers, the vulture's attack and the subsequent of the lifelessness of the purple creature, the purple creature's interaction with the dinosaur and subsequent anger and desire to burn the world. The "grand narratives of legitimation" have legitimated both science and the social bond in the modern? Lyotard points out two fundamental models: the speculative narrative and the narrative of emancipation. Graphic novels often center around anti-heroes, highlighting their complexities and moral ambiguities. They may dwell on moments of inaction to the extent that they evoke a sense of profound ennui. Furthermore, these works frequently employ repetition and emphasize the mundane, both thematically and visually, to underscore the monotony of existence (Schneider 2016). The visual storytelling with the use of symbolism and thematic coherence in 'The Saga of Ghost Girl' follows a progression after the 'Stupid Arrow' reflecting the disintegration of society with the introduction of the superhero genre popularized in the West, offering a unique and compelling perspective of the lost innocence and the forgotten

past through the character of the mysterious 'ghost' figure in the dystopian world, whereas the world of pervasive government surveillance, strict social control, and suppression of individuality and freedom is the hallmark of the dystopian story "16917P's Masterpiece" that is set in the future, the significant world of art, technology, and propaganda serving as a focal point for the character's journey and the regime's control over the populace and artificial intelligence has gained control over society.

"Accordion Maneuver" provides a unique and specific action or event within the narrative that merges as a key moment within the story's progression, such as a daring escape, a pivotal battle, or a crucial revelation. However, the progression of the dystopian narrative through these elements contributes to the broader themes of resistance, identity, and the search for freedom within a dystopian society, as seen through Appupen's imagination and thought-provoking storytelling and artwork.

The construction of the familiar setting of the story "Stupid Arrow," the dramatic irony and ambiguity of the two kingdoms, differentiated through the usage of green and orange colors, explores the utopian and dystopian plots engaging with the collective desires, anxieties, and social contradictions. Appupen explores the utopian narrative of the love affair between the Green Prince and the Orange Prince to highlight the cultural expression, the exploitation of the lovers, and their alienation in the power-centric world to the forefront, illustrated through the cutting off all ties between the two kingdoms to reinforce the deeper physical or psychological concepts. The graphic novel, unlike the traditional novel, takes the liberty of taking the narrative back and forth to focus more on the symbols of oppression, stripping the illustrated characters of their identities. This phenomenon has also been used to underscore the loss of personal autonomy and freedom within the totalitarian society, enriching the storyline with the depth and complexity of the artistic expression, and engaging the reader on multiple levels. The anonymity of the character shifts the focus from individual narratives to the collective experiences in the society under oppression for a broader exploration of systematic issues, societal dynamics, and the impact of authoritarian rule on the populace as a whole rather than on specific individuals. Appupen, through his illustrative five stories, exposes the absence of personal identity to prompt contemplation of existential questions related to the nature of individuality, free will, and the search for meaning in a restrictive and dehumanizing environment. In a dystopian setting, the enrichment of philosophical and psychological narratives is meant to invite readers to ponder the implications of living in a dystopian world. For instance, the perched kingdoms on top of two adjacent steep hills, the deep gorge with the bodies of the dead soldiers decrease the steep slope between the mountain and thus ensure a fight between the two kingdoms amidst the fading sunlight, leading to their demise has been assumed for the amplification of the oppression, conformity, and resistance on the one hand and raising fundamental questions of human experience on the other. Appupen sets the satirical narrative of an ironical meeting of the two lovers, borrowed from the basic premise of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, on the deathbed of the soldiers, kings, and their armors and weapons as a subversion of the tragic ending of the two lovers from warring communities. The death of *Romeo and Juliet* can be

seen as a defiant act of agency where the idea of the forbidden love and pursuit of individual happiness in dystopian, contemporary themes and social commentary unfolds the dystopian future vis-a-vis a repressive regime exerting control over every aspect of citizen's lives, stifling individuality, freedom, and love. The postmodern retelling of the love is illustrated as an act of defiance of oppressive social order while the lovers seek to carve out their own identities and pursue their love in the face of overwhelming adversity, and their struggle becomes a metaphor for the resilience of the human spirit against authoritarianism and the quest for personal autonomy in a world that seeks to erase individual agency. Appupen addresses the love, passion, and defiance interwoven with contemporary issues such as surveillance, propaganda, and the erosion of privacy, reflecting the concerns of postmodernism. The author creates the narrative arc to culminate the dramatic confrontation of the protagonists against the forces of a totalitarian regime and, rather than meeting the tragic end, emerges as a symbol of hope and resistance, inspiring others to continue the fight for freedom and individual expression. Appupen's conclusion of a reunion of two lovers in a dystopian world filled with destruction and contradiction is indeed evocative.

As readers immerse themselves in the captivating world of "The Saga of the Ghost Girl," they are transported to a fictional realm characterized by oppressive regimes, societal decay, and a marked departure from the familiar. Through the graphic storytelling medium, the narrative employs surreal and haunting imagery to explore themes of social alienation, existential angst, and the distortions of power and reality. Within this evocative framework, the journey of the ghost girl unfolds as a profound exploration of the individual's struggle to find significance and belonging in a world that appears indifferent or hostile to her existence. The unfolding of the story of a family of three attacked by a dragon-like figure sets the narrative of the workings of the dystopian society, revealing the flaws and exposing the injustices while the protagonist navigates through the harsh environment, encountering a variety of strange and often unsettling characters and situations. Through the experiences of the Ghost Girl, Appupen establishes a dystopian narrative and offers a lens to the readers to explore the themes of power politics, corruption, and politics of identity and human conditions. The transformation of a child into a vigilante indicates a response to the perceived injustices or a rebellion against a dystopian system. The influence of a woman implies a significant role in shaping the child's beliefs and actions, possibly representing a beacon of resistance or a catalyst for change. Dystopian accounts often explore themes of societal control, individual agency, and the consequences of power imbalances. The vigilante aspect adds a layer of resistance against the established order, reflecting a desire for justice or a pushback against an oppressive regime. Appupen can depict the time-lapse through his illustration skills, along with the nature of social commentary on how a child perceives an incident and how it has a massive impact on his entire existence. In the culmination of narratives, 'The Accordion Maneuver' strides away from the somber imagery of its forerunners, delivering a scathing critique of the dystopian spectacle that is celebrity culture. Appupen, through satire, unveils the grotesque beauty standards that grip the veins of our contemporary society, painting a harrowing picture of an era where the pursuit of perfection becomes a perilous obsession. In the dystopian tableau, the revered Divine Lady Mayaveh

emerges as a godlike icon, worshipped for her unattainable beauty and unimaginable body standards. The young girl's desperate yearning to emulate this divine figure finds fulfillment through an otherworldly intervention, mirroring the unsettling reality of modern-day plastic surgery. Lady Mayaveh becomes the embodiment of a capitalistic fervor, an entity perpetuating and normalizing the insidious quest for unhealthy beauty standards. This narrative unravels the dark underbelly of a society entangled in a web of unrealistic ideals, where the pursuit of perfection exacts a toll on individual identity in the name of an unrelenting and profit-driven aesthetic. In the grim tapestry of our dystopian reality, the young girl undergoes a harrowing metamorphosis to conform to society's twisted beauty standards. Her anguish intensifies as she loses her cherished symbol of womanhood—her breasts, echoing the insidious impact of these beauty ideals. Enter the armed man, a patriarchal guardian fixated on preserving the facade of false beauty, perpetuating a vicious cycle of psychological torment. This narrative unveils the haunting repercussions of a society ensnared by oppressive standards, where individual identity becomes collateral damage in the pursuit of an unattainable, distorted perfection.

Appupen skillfully emphasizes the control exerted by patriarchy and its inherent supremacy to challenge traditional gender roles by portraying the character dressing up as a woman while engaging in acts of saving or rescuing. It can be counted as an artistic choice that associates the duties of saving and rescuing with women, subverting conventional expectations; Appupen deconstructs the stereotypical characterization attributed to masculinity, which often includes qualities like bravery, strength, emotional resilience, and being a protector. This narrative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of gender roles, questioning societal norms and expectations. Moreover, the narrative highlights the importance of discourse-building in shaping our understanding of the world. In Foucault's concept of discourse, which is central to his work "Discipline and Punish," the narrative's emphasis on discourse-building aligns with the ideas of power and knowledge. Appupen uses discourse-building that aligns with Foucault's notion that power operates through various discourses that influence and shape individuals and society. By challenging traditional gender roles in "The Saga of the Ghost Girl" and associating the act of saving or rescuing with a different gender, the narrative disrupts established discourses on masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, Foucault's concept of "disciplinary power" is relevant in the narrative of "Accordion Maneuver" to suggest subversion of traditional power structures by altering the discourse around gender roles and duties. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses how societies employ various methods of discipline to control individuals. Similarly, Appupen depicts "Oberian Dysphoria" as a discourse on the manipulation of the dominant ideologies on challenges and resistance to the disciplinary power embedded in societal expectations. The narrative's emphasis on discourse-building aligns with Foucault's ideas by illustrating the transformative potential of language and knowledge in shaping our understanding of societal ideologies, norms, and power dynamics.

Appupen creates visual cues to enhance the storytelling experience, allowing readers to intuitively grasp the time-lapse and evolving changes in the graphic's color patterns, which serve as an aggressive means of conveying temporal progression and enriching the visual

storytelling experience in graphics. The use of dark colors in "The Saga of the Ghost Girl," where the kid is attacked by the ghost and subsequently rescued, serves as a powerful visual dystopian storytelling technique. However, after the advent of the superhero and the death of the dragon, the usage of bright yellow symbolizes the reinstallation of hope in the gloomy world of Halahala.

The penultimate short story titled '16917P's Masterpiece', the grimmest of the lot, paints a dark picture of the dystopian world covered by clouds of gloom, the dystopian future to follow the story of a world plagued by environmental degradation, social inequality, and technological manipulation. The author's narrative arc moves from the personal resistance against the oppressors for the sake of love objectively to the universal global concerns where the world is ravaged by climate change, pollution, and the relentless march of technology, where the environment is bleak and desolate, with polluted skies, decaying cities, and a society plagued by inequality and injustice. Appupen's detailed exploration of concerns that plague the world is comparable to John Stuart Mill's idea of "dystopia as an imaginary place where people often lead dehumanized and fearful lives." (Dystopia 2010). The protagonist's journey becomes a symbol of resistance in the dystopian world, exploring the themes of rebellion, self-discovery, and the struggle for freedom in a society dominated by oppression and manipulation. Similarly, the potential consequences of unchecked technological advancement, environmental neglect, and societal inequality are explored through the powerful narrative of "16917P's Masterpiece". In the canvas of Huxley's *Brave New World*, a dystopian tapestry unfolds, portraying a bleak tableau where the darkest facets of humanity reign unchecked and stands as a poignant warning, urging us to reflect on the potential trajectory of our reality should we neglect the urgency of addressing pressing issues. Within this narrative, technology becomes a double-edged sword, wielding formidable tools for societal manipulation. Amidst the controlled perfection, a yearning emerges among the intellectual and cultured elite for a society less flawless yet more liberating—a yearning for a non-utopian realm that embraces imperfection over the illusion of utopia.

A dystopian backdrop design has been crafted in all the stories to mirror the moral decay gripping the postmodern realm that serves as an ominous thread weaving all the tales together, foretelling impending doom. Appupen, wielding bizarre graphics, skillfully retains the waning attention spans of readers, inviting them to delve into images that demand interpretation to unveil their ultimate significance. This quest for 'meaning' becomes an inherently subjective journey, as interpretation becomes a deeply personal odyssey, leaving room for ambiguity and a fertile ground for imagination to flourish. Embracing Lyotard's notion of paganism, the writer rejects a singular meaning in favor of celebrating the existence of myriad differences. Each graphic forms a distinct mini-narrative, carrying its intrinsic value and relevance in this dystopian tapestry to intertwine the themes of pluralism and diversity. The fragmented narrative employed by Appupen is the true essence of the postmodern discourse, which exalts the end of the grand metanarrative and where a single perspective cannot act as a universal truth. His work, *The Legends of Halahala*, aligns with postmodern thought, which believes that art can distort the existing notion and help break

away from the conventional world order, thus stressing ambiguity as an ongoing creative process rather than a limitation.

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