

## Ling Ma's *Severance*: A Dystopian Pre/Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Time of Covid-19

<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.22.2.9>

Soha A. Helmy

Tanta University, Egypt

Taibah University, KSA

Received on 8.8.2021

Accepted on 24.2.2022

Published on 10.6.2022

**Abstract:** *In her attempt to write an apocalyptic fictional story, Ling Ma succeeds in creating an extraordinarily believable and engrossing anti-utopian image of the world. Her debut, Severance (2018), transcends the dystopian apocalyptic genre and becomes an impressive prophecy that partially comes true during the current Coronavirus crisis. It announces her as a talented author with its mix of humor, anger, terror and satire. Ma intends her book to be a critique of Capitalism. That is why she magnifies its harmful side effects through the lens of a destructive illness that starts with flu-like symptoms and develops into a pandemic. However, her book rings shocking and frighteningly true these days with the widespread of Covid-19. This research examines Ma's Severance from a dystopian pre/post-apocalyptic perspective and highlights the similarities between its events and what happens during the current Covid-19 pandemic. The analogy between both pandemics proves that dystopian apocalyptic works are not always science fictional. First, the research briefly traces the origin of dystopian apocalyptic literature. Then, it discusses the use of common characteristics of this genre in the novel. Among them are the loss of individualism, the spread of plagues and pandemics, totalitarianism, the regimented lives of citizens, using the 'defamiliarization' technique, and emphasis on the theme of survivorship.*

**Key Words:** Apocalyptic literature, Covid-19, dystopia, Ling Ma, *Severance*

Ling Ma is a Chinese American author, who was born in 1983. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Arts in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of Chicago. Her widely read and critically acclaimed novel, *Severance*, was published in 2018 and made her one of the best emerging writers of the 2020 Writing Award for Fiction. Her dexterous pre/post-apocalyptic novel that foreshadows the Coronavirus Pandemic received the Kirkus Prize and was named a New York Times Notable Book of the year in 2018. In addition, *Severance* was awarded the Young Lions Fiction Award and won the CVU Cabell First Novelist award in 2019. Recently, Ling Ma's novel enjoys a resurgence of popularity and attention with the spread of Covid-19.

The aim of this research paper is to analyze Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) from a dystopian apocalyptic perspective that proves to be a predictor of the current worldwide pandemic. Ma's unusual pre/post-apocalyptic debut introduces a prophecy that satirically foretells the late phase of Capitalism and its destructive effect. However, without meaning it, the prophecy partially comes true. The way

she portrays the disaster of the pandemic that results from and ends Capitalism in the novel is amazingly similar in many details to the painful reality of the world during the Covid-19 time. Ma's novel proves that dystopian literature is not necessarily science fiction. It also proves that what might be regarded by one nation or government as a utopia, might be dystopian in disguise. Written as a warning against the current day dehumanizing Capitalism, *Severance* reflects Ma's perspective of its frightening end when it is taken to extremes and transforms people, especially the working class, into traumatized and emotionless robots. She supposedly sets her novel in the near past to show her great concern and skepticism of an allegedly or assumed-to-be perfect society. It aims to awaken Capitalist governments from disillusionment that might soon result in a disaster. It is really interesting and shocking at the same time to understand how prophetic this pre/post-apocalyptic dystopian novel is.

*Severance* revolves around Candace Chen, a second-generation Chinese immigrant, who moved to the United States when she was six. Candace, who works in a big Manhattan Publishing firm, called Spectra, coordinates the production of specialty Bibles by outsourcing them to printers in China. She narrates her own life story in a series of flashbacks that interweaves near and far-past events. She sadly finds herself in the middle of a widely spread 21<sup>st</sup> Century pandemic called Shen Fever. But this time, the pandemic is not like Sars, Mers, or Ebola. It brings human civilization to its knees and shows how weak the global system is. The global fever starts among workers in China and rapidly spreads across the whole world to kill most of its population.

As the Shen Fever sweeps New York, the streets are empty, families flee and companies stop their business, Candace, the worker bee refuses to leave and accepts a very big bonus for being one of the teams that keep the company open. Then she begins to anonymously take photographs for the eerie city and uploads them to her NY Ghost blog becomes an essential source of information about the empty city to all survivors in the world. When she realizes how dangerous and unbearable it is to stay alone in New York after the outbreak that has changed her normal life, she joins a small group of survivors, heading towards a deserted mall outside Chicago, which they call the Facility. The story reveals the ups and downs in Candace's relationships with the survivors, especially Bob, the IT technician, who sets himself the leader of the group and becomes the novel's main antagonist. As the story goes on, she fails to hide the secret of her pregnancy from Bob, who exploits it and imprisons her in one of the mall's stores. Finally, she decides to escape alone to Chicago in an attempt to find a new beginning for herself and the baby.

The appeal of Ma's book lies in its similarities with the contemporary situation of the Coronavirus pandemic. Although the current pandemic is said to be originated in the animal markets of Wuhan, China, which is a major economic center, it is still a direct result of a bigger agro-industrial system as portrayed in *Severance*. As stated in the novel, the Shen Fever "developed within factory conditions of manufacturing areas, the SEZs in China" (2018: 210). Even though the disease is fatal and incurable in *Severance*, the analogy between the two pandemics that start with flu-like symptoms, and the way they are widely spread,

show the great dependency on Chinese industrial advancements and technology and its deep negative or positive effects on the whole world. For this reason, Covid-19 and Shen Fever challenge “China whose rise to economic and political prominence has relied on steady global flows of resources and goods.” Both fictional and real pandemics are “very likely to contribute to the reshaping of the global order” (Aaltola 2020:4).

As a matter of fact, writers’ attention has been directed to dystopian texts very long ago. However, being two different sides of the same coin, dystopia can never be fully comprehended as a term without clarifying the meaning of its predecessor that inspired its emergence, utopia. Although the concept ‘utopia’ is believed to have its birth in Plato’s *Republic* that was written around 380 BC, it is as old as humans’ dreams of an ideal and perfect society. In this society every aspect of life is flawless and “all conflicts of conscience and conflicts of interest are abolished.” It is as old as people’s belief in the Heaven of Eden which is mentioned in religious books. It is a world of an earthly paradise in which “all the obstacles to a decent life for all men have been removed” and “the resourcefulness of modern technology is put in the unfettered service of lessening labor” with “peace, abundance, and virtue permanently and universally obtained” (Kateb 1963:17).

In 1516, the term utopia was literally coined for the first time by Sir Thomas More in his book, *Utopia*, which fictionalized an imaginary ideal society. More’s society enjoys political stability, prosperity, and social harmony. The term utopia is originally consisted of two Greek words that mean ‘no place,’ but has been used in English to stand for a ‘good place.’ So, the term finally comes to refer to a good place, which is too perfect to exist.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the development in the philosophical and psychological analysis of human beings coincided with prevailing moods of ambivalence, confusion, alienation, and lack of confidence in people’s ability to live peacefully and in harmony with nature to make the utopian vision fade away. The dreadful chaos of the World Wars increased people’s sense of alienation and confusion. Moreover, the threat of technological advancements and scientific developments, which were once supposed to help people and make their life easier, became a tool of destruction and a means to cause misery. With the general sense of depression and skepticism, people began to wonder what would happen if a society’s planning for perfect Utopianism goes wrong or even turns against its people and threatens them. People realize that Utopianism is not only unsuccessful and ineffective but also unattainable.

Emerged as a descendant of its older predecessor, utopia, and coined in the second half of the nineteenth century by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill in his speech in the House of Commons, dystopia was translated from Greek to indicate a bad place, where people are miserable or oppressed. It becomes a literary genre that emerged “as a critical response and an antithesis to Utopian fiction” (Turku 2016:56). If utopian literature depicts hope for a perfect future, dystopia - a utopia which has gone wrong - warns against and “delineates the crushing of [that] hope” (2003:209), as Maria Varsam puts it. Dystopias warn people that the once-thought to be a paradise would turn out to be hell.

With the terrifying major events of the twentieth century, a “hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, deicide, famine, ecocide, depression, debt” (Moylan 2000: xi), dystopian literature flourished as a natural skeptical reaction to the dreamy utopian vision of the world. The main distinction between the two genres manifests itself in their different outcomes of the utopian planning of societies. If this outcome is positive, it is a utopia, and if it is negative and destructive, it is a dystopia. This leads some critics to see that “dystopia best fits the description of the subgenre of anti-utopia.” From their point of view, “anti-utopian texts serve to discredit the mere possibility of ever achieving a utopian social order.” However, “dystopias allow for the possibility by showing the horrifying, and very likely, outcomes following the realization of such utopian ideals” (2016:426), as Demir Alihodžić and Selma Jerković point out. Whereas the utopian genre depicts an imaginary delineation and a deep faith in human nature, justice and goodness, dystopias present actual life experiences, weaknesses and problems that people undergo while trying to establish this utopian society. In short, “dystopian authors saw nothing in the future but hopeless darkness” (2019:33), as Ágnes Heller and Riccardo Mazzeo state.

With the appearance of dominating governments, tyrannical authorities and totalitarian systems that suppress the freedom of their people and impose strict control on their individuality and every feature of their lives, the emergence of dystopian fiction became logical and was reflected in the wide popularity and effect of dystopian classics; such as George Orwell’s *1984*. “When governments have the power to exterminate the globe,” as David Riesman puts it, “it is not surprising that anti-Utopian novels, like *1984*, are popular, while utopian political thought about a more hopeful future nearly disappears” (1964:95). The year 1984 has already gone, but the tormenting visualization of Orwell might come true anytime in the present or the future.

As a matter of fact, dystopian writers might exaggerate in their portrayal of a gloomy future created by oppressive societal domination, tyrannical economical system, natural disaster, or disease. Sometimes, their description might be regarded as a sad hallucination. Even though its setting is almost in the future, dystopia might purposefully take place in the present or even the past to reflect the urgency of its concerns about a problem that might be taken to the extreme and destroy the world. It aims to function as an alarm or “a prophetic vehicle” (2003:1–2), as Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan say. This alarm is against an imminent danger or catastrophe that threatens humanity, hoping that corrective actions might be taken to prevent it from coming true.

Writers began to be more interested in dystopian apocalyptic literature after the horrible and fatal impact of dropping nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, every race and every nation carry in their “literature and religion the implicit reiterating and unrelenting question: is the end near?” and usually the answer is “yes, it is and here are its signs” (Lumpkin 2010:380). Since 1945, the term “apocalyptic” has been increasingly used to refer to any disaster, fundamental or drastic “change, real or perceived,” or “any planetary catastrophe or its anticipated effects” (2014:478), as Lorenzo DiTommaso implies in his essay

“Apocalypticism and Popular Culture.” The number of disasters increased in the following decades to include apocalypses like the Vietnam War and the shocking damage of 9/11. These horrible events pave the way for post-apocalyptic fiction that began to flourish in the 1960s. It depicts what happens to humans who try to survive and start their lives again before the end of a disaster or the collapse of the Earth’s civilization.

By offering an account of what might happen to humanity after the end of a cataclysm, such as natural disaster, nuclear catastrophe, or plague, post-apocalyptic literature is simply defined by its setting or the time after the disastrous apocalypse. It offers survivorship and trauma themes to reflect the suffering of humanity while existing in a painful intermediate status between the past and the present or the old and the new. It gives an account of an in-between condition, which is characterized by failure of history and value system, and lack of faith in the future. Post-apocalyptic fiction “plays a key role in a warning and educating society” (Houfková 2019:60) against the destructive results of political policies, social problems and the misuse of nature or technology.

With the misuse of technology and scientific advancement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people’s old fear of plagues, such as the Cholera, Black Death, or Spanish Flu, has been transformed into a new kind of fear from pandemics caused by strong military forces or laboratory-made and modified viruses. These artificial viruses’ effects might be as nightmarish as that of nuclear weapons. This contemporary threat incites the imagination of writers to create “a deep simulative experience of dystopian change of the current world” (Houfková 2019:63) through post-apocalyptic fiction as a living example. It is quite logical to think that this is “the Golden Age of post-apocalyptic literature” (2019:62).

The successful post-apocalyptic novel mixes fictional elements with current realistic aspects or fears in readers’ minds. By removing the boundaries between reality and fictionality while reading, post-apocalyptic novels show the urgency of their message and the imminent danger humanity might face. This is what happens in Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018). The setting is realistic, but the events predict an imagined disaster that partially comes true these days. While reading it, the reader can easily detect the relevance between its events and the current global situation. As a pre/post-apocalyptic dystopia, *Severance* presents a “social planning that backfires and slides into nightmare.” (Walsh 1962:137). It portrays a world that depends heavily on Capitalism and cares for economic profits more than human souls.

*Severance* concentrates on the United States to show the ugly face of a system that has been established on the backs of migrant laborers. It explores how the system collapses when these workers get sick. This situation echoes what happens nowadays in many countries, including the US, when the pandemic hits the poor workers badly due to their low health insurance. It also shows its destructive impact on the global economy and normal life as people are used to it.

Many of these laborers, especially immigrants or foreigners, insist on going to work every day after the spread of the disease or hiding their sickness after getting infected. They want to show their dedication to work and “prove their

usefulness to the country that had deigned to adopt them” (188), as Ma mentions in her novel, even at the expense of their health or life. Eventually, these countries find it inevitable to give the priority to humans over the economy and profits before they lose everything.

One of the most important dystopian features that is clear in the novel is the loss of individualism. In an anti-Capitalist satire, *Severance* criticizes a late stage of Capitalism in big industrial cities that badly affects humans, denies them freedom of choice and forces them to work in difficult, and sometimes, dangerous conditions for a living. Working as a production assistant at a publishing company in New York, Candace is not happy or satisfied with her job. As the whole world is falling apart around her, Candace has to make sure that the Gemstone Bibles made for teenagers will be made for a client who does not care about the Chinese workers who “are dying” (24) and their “lungs shriveled up into morel mushrooms” as they have been breathing the dust of these “semiprecious stones” for years. Although the “gemstone granules are tearing up their lungs,” the Chinese government does not care about their rights or safety. It transforms them into living robots or machines, working and dying for the sake and benefit of the state as a great economic power. In such inhumane working conditions, there is no place for individualism or indigenous identities. People are working only for the common happiness and prosperity of the state.

As in a typical dystopian novel, the governments are totalitarian. To guarantee the achievement of economic goals and assure the full submission and maximum productivity of their workers, news about highly spread diseases must be hidden. In most cases, the lack of honest information about these diseases causes a catastrophe when they transform into plagues and pandemics. *Severance* foreshadows what happens in the world’s current situation when “Chinese officials did not inform the public, and they alerted the World Health Organization with a reassuring statement on 31 December: the disease is preventable and controllable” (Grech 2020:6). The Chinese officials hid the real numbers of infected people until it was too late. The disease spread all over the world and it was impossible to contain it, especially with the global economic system that links China with all countries, especially the United States, the setting of the novel.

*Severance* mirrors the destructive effect of the uncontrollable pandemic on the United States, especially New York. In the beginning, China does not reveal the real facts about Shen Fever. “The state media in China controls the optics of this,” as Jonathan, Candace’s boyfriend says. They hide “the real statistics,” as a way to control “mass panic.” At the same time, “they do not want foreign investors to pull out of their economy. They need to save face” (2018:200). Then, as the pandemic becomes inevitable, rumors spread, suggesting that “more than a third of the population in China are fevered. It’s way worse than avian flu.” Shortly, Shen Fever begins to spread in America. “It tends to move the fastest in coastal areas that sea a lot of trade, a lot of shipping, imports” (2018: 200).

Another significant and ever-present feature of dystopian/apocalyptic literature is the spread of plagues and pandemics and the inability of scientific advancement and technology to save people. Sometimes the pandemic itself is a

nightmarish result of medical inventions or biological experiments taken to their extreme points and cause the annihilation of societies. It is amazing how *Severance* resembles the current Covid-19 pandemic in some of its symptoms and the way governments and people deal with it. As Ma describes it in her novel:

In its initial stages, Shen Fever is difficult to detect. Early symptoms include memory lapse, headaches, disorientation, shortness of breath, and fatigue. Because these symptoms are often mistaken for the common cold, patients are often unaware they have contracted Shen Fever. They may appear functional and are still able to execute rote, everyday tasks. However, these initial symptoms will worsen. (2018:19) Later, patients would show “signs of malnourishment ... and impaired motor coordination.” After that, their “physical movements may appear more effortful and clumsy.” Depending on “the strength of the patient’s immune system” (2018:19), the fever’s symptoms may take from one to four weeks to develop.

In the beginning, the governments hide the seriousness of the disease and treat it as “a fringe phenomenon” (2018: 210). They are afraid of “its potential in inciting mass panic” (2018: 214). As in the world’s current situation, the “seriousness of the epidemic varied depending on which news source you trusted” (2018: 214). However, soon, the number of the “U.S. victims of Shen Fever” (2018: 210), who “traveled ... through the shipment of goods from China to the States” (2018: 20) has been multiplied. Then, it becomes “difficult to get an accurate victim count ... you couldn’t just Google it anymore. The last public count had been at 237,561” (2018: 214). Logically, a “travel ban of visitors from Asian countries had passed” (2018: 215) with “China at the top of the list” (2018: 210).

Governments start to warn their citizens that “Shen Fever is contracted by breathing in microscopic spores in the air. Because these spores are undetachable, it is difficult to prevent exposure in areas where it is in the environment” (2018: 149). Once these spores are “inhaled, they spread from the lungs and nasal areas to other organs, most commonly to the brain.” The “Shen Fever is a particularly aggressive strain, as its fungal spores disseminate through the body quickly” (2018:148). So, precautionary measures have to be taken just as in the world’s current situation. Spectra “is distributing personal-care kits to every employee.” These kits include “sets of N95 face masks and latex gloves” (2018: 20). In the beginning, the employees do not take it seriously, but after a while, they realize these tools will be essential if they want to survive. “An email notice came around that it was now company policy for all employees to wear N95 masks in the office (before, this had only been suggested)” (2018: 208).

Although most of Shen Fever’s initial symptoms resemble those of Coronavirus, its second stage is different. As its initial symptoms get worsen, patients lose control of their actions. They keep repeating the same actions until they die out of starvation or fatigue. “It is a fever of repetition, of routine” (2018: 62). “Memories beget memories,” as Candace thinks, “Shen Fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories” (2018: 160).

The Shen Fever turns fevered into Zombies, but they are not attacking or hurting people. They are actually hurting themselves by living in a kind of

Zombified pantomime and repeating one habit they used to do in their normal life until they collapse. Some employees at Candace's company, like Seth, get infected. He has spent the whole weekend in the office, "sitting at his computer, surrounded by coffee mugs. His email history showed a series of errant messages, sent to the Hong Kong and Singapore offices" (2018: 208). His colleagues are frightened, even though an antifungal service sprays every inch in the office, walls, corners and carpets. They avoided being near his office or even with people who work nearby his department's employees.

Ma presents other painful examples of victims. There is Candace's old neighbor, who keeps trying to open the door of her apartment with "something mechanical, jerky, in her movements" (2018: 155). She is watching a news program on T.V. in which the reporter is talking about the Shen Fever cases. He states that they are underreported because many people are living alone – like her – and she keeps laughing the same way she used to laugh while watching her favorite program or series in the past. There is also the clever sales lady who keeps "folding and refolding pastel polo shirts" carefully "even in her fevered condition" (2018: 258).

Actually, day after day, the disease disseminates rapidly in New York, China and all over the world. There are rumors that the whole city of Shenzhen, the origin of the disease, is fevered. The streets of New York are almost empty, except the fevered, who "stumbled around ... in ever-diminishing numbers." Candace sadly describes examples of them, like "the old lady in her nightgown, pushing her food cart back and forth in front of Gristedes. Or the homeless teen couple in Tompkins Square Park, jiggling coffee cups of change to attract nonexistent passersby" (2018: 258). As in the current situation of Covid-19, the big city is rapidly breaking down and "curtailing all its services" (2018: 251). The services are simply crumbled as "there's no labor infrastructure to maintain it" (2018: 238). The famous Times Square is "completely deserted" (2018: 252) because "there's a tourism industry anymore" (2018: 261). There is nobody in the streets to the extent that "If a horse rides through Times Square" (2018: 253), there is no one to see or document it.

The way the fevered victims are unconsciously repeating their actions leads to another feature of dystopian literature, which is the regimented lives of citizens, especially in Capitalist societies. This repetition is a symbol of the excessive rules and routine cycle of Capitalism that robotized people, especially those who belong to the working class and laborers. This never-interrupted routine that "establishes rhythm" and "imposes particular occupations" (1979:149), as Michel Foucault says, makes it easier for governments to gain full control and discipline from their citizens and guarantee their blind compliance.

While tackling this dystopian feature in her novel, Ma employs a technique of 'defamiliarization' to disturb the taken-for-granted reality in the readers' minds. In the opening pages of her anti-capitalist satirical novel, Ma writes, "The End begins before you are ever aware of it. It passes as ordinary" (2018: 9). Like most people around the world, Candace is entrapped in a regulated repetition cycle. "Then I got up," as she keeps stating, "I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine" (2018: 159). She keeps repeating the same



words many times in the novel. These words echo most people's regular lives. Her life is so familiar.

Keeping in mind that "dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations [sic] of a situation that already exists in reality," (1994:15), as Keith Booker notes, defamiliarization does not mean non-existence. It is as if Ma used a fun-house mirror to awaken people's awareness of the distortion of contemporary reality. The novel might exaggerate, but it certainly highlights these reality's weaknesses and makes them clearer in people's eyes. So, by distancing or defamiliarizing the real dominating powers in the world; such as China and America, through a fictional disease that wreaks havoc globally, the ugly face of Capitalism manifests itself.

As a Chinese immigrant's daughter, Candace is obsessed with her daily routine. That is why she accepts an offer of a massive paycheck from her company if she continues to work from her office, while everybody else is quarantined. In an attempt to defeat defamiliarization, she keeps working in her office in Manhattan, while her other co-workers get infected, quit, or die. When the elevator suddenly stops in the middle of its way to her office on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor, Candace is afraid it might fall. She cannot find anyone to respond to her emergency call in the deserted building. However, she is not panicked. When the 911 operator eventually answers her call, she has to justify her presence in the company while the infrastructure is uncovered with maintenance. "I have a contract that stipulates I have to work in the office until a certain day" (2018: 251), Candace replies.

Dedicated to her work and addicted to normalcy and routine, Candace decides to live alone in her office until the contract is over. However, she decides to take documentary photographs of the eerie city and post them on a WordPress blog as the anonymous NY Ghost. She uploads her pictures for people in distant places around the world, who have not been infected by the disease and are eager to find out what is going on in the dying city. What she documents surprisingly echoes what the readers have been suffering from in the last period.

It is amazing how Ma's *Severance* includes clear parallels to the widespread pandemic nowadays. It gives evidence that apocalyptic fiction is the best to suit the sad mood of this hard time. As Bob points out in a conversation with Candace, when "you wake up in a fictitious world your only frame of reference is fiction" (2018: 29). The novel seems to argue that a "state of exception" or fantasy, can easily "become a state of normal condition" (2018: 8), as Moulay Driss El Maarouf, Taieb Belghazi and Farouk El Maarouf say, and this is exactly what is happening nowadays. The novel describes the empty squares and streets, enforced quarantine, working from home, social distancing, and the constant fear of going outside and contact with the people we love. It also shows the difficulty to have access to emergency resources, the lean staffing and the shortage in the number of people who work in shops, supermarkets and restaurants and have no health insurance. When reading such parts, the readers remember their painful craving for normalcy and routine. Their life routine has been changed into a worse regimented lifestyle after the outbreak of Covid-19. People live in fear and according to strict instructions by their governments. They are sadly bound to an authority that

prevents them from expressing personal emotions or meeting their loved ones freely. They are subjected to an enforced cession on movement from one country to the other. Even in their own countries, they cannot gather in public places and are deeply indulged in regimented lifestyles.

Apparently, it is not only Candace who is addicted to routine. While fearing the unknown, all people around the world now are yearning to go back to normal. As days are overlapping with each other, people cannot stop grieving what they were. Though dull, people find pleasure in repeating the same daily actions and habits that grant them feelings of comfort and security. “To live in a city” as Candace points out, “is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out?” (2018: 290). People have indeed been longing for a break from their life routine, but unfortunately, Covid-19 or Shen Fever do not give them the moderate and safe alternative they have been wishing for. For example, in the time of a storm, “[w]e all hoped the storm would knock things over, fuck things up enough but not too much,” as Candace remarks. “We hoped the damage was bad enough to cancel work the next morning but not so bad that we couldn’t go to brunch instead” (2018: 199). Though an anti-Capitalist satirical novel, *Severance* cannot find an easy or reasonable solution to get rid of the deeply rooted Capitalism.

Finally, Candace recognizes that she cannot fight or ignore defamiliarization if she wants to survive. She understands the dilemma she has been living in for a while. While moving between timelines, Candace recites when she realizes that she will never receive the promised paycheck as there is nobody left to sign it. She decides to leave New York. She coincidentally finds the last group of survivors and she is “the last one of the group to join” (2018: 7). By this time, “the infrastructure had already collapsed. The internet had caved into a sinkhole, [and] the electrical grid had shut down” (2018: 7). The group includes brand strategies, lawyers, human resources specialists and the IT specialist, Bob.

Another feature of dystopian apocalyptic literature is totalitarianism, which is best embodied in Bob. Bob represents the continuation of dystopian totalitarianism in the post-apocalyptic phase of the world in *Severance*. He ritualizes the post-apocalyptic state of the small group of survivors. As an American power-hungry leader, he sets his strict rules and orders. Then, he promises to lead them to safety if they obey him. He decides to take the group to what he calls the Facility. It is a mall on the outskirts of Chicago, where he used to go in his childhood. On their way to the Facility, the group members, under the leadership of Bob, collect their supplies and food by going on ‘stalks.’ They attack houses, which are abandoned or sometimes inhabited by helpless fevered searching for useful items. Candace describes the group members’ feeling of shame during these expeditions while they are stealing their “comforts” from these terribly tired and defenseless fevered, saying: “We had known ourselves to be cowards and hypocrites, pernicious liars really, and to find this suspicion confirmed was not a relief but a horror” (2018: 6).

These scenes somehow remind readers of people's reactions to the shortage of some supplies at the beginning of quarantine. During that time, some people began to attack shops and supermarkets and steal goods. Some others bought more than what they needed without thinking about the others. "The reduction in goods flowing through the global supply chain, and substantial reliance on China for imported goods" (2020:9), as Peterson Ozili and Thankom Arun remark, "led to shortages of supplies to import-dependent countries as China shut down many of its export factories". It felt like the opening horror scenes of a dystopian movie. While Covid-19 is spreading everywhere from east to west, people have to remind themselves all the time that this is not a work of fiction.

The theme of survivorship, which is a key element in post-apocalyptic novels, manifests itself with the psychological trauma of the survivors. In the middle of chaos, difficult conditions, and grief, the survivors suffer from guilt. By fighting over consumables in supermarkets, people prove that they can forget about their civilized dignity and respectful status when they are blinded by panic. It proves that "barbarism stands an inch on the verge of the apocalypse-to-be" (2020:8), as El Maarouf et al. put it. This is echoed in the novel by the protagonist herself when she shoots infected victims after the strict insistence of Bob. It also appears when she encounters Eddie, the taxi driver, for the second time when she is trying to escape New York. As she sees his car, she decides to pull him out of it and drive away. Eddie, who seems to be fevered, does not show any sign of opposition or resistance. Only later does Candace begin to feel bad as she suspects that Eddie stopped to take her with him. She suspects that maybe he was trying to escape the city and wanted to help her, or maybe he was not fevered at all, but she imagined it out of her panic and barbarian desire to save herself and leave the city as soon as she can, especially with the absence of other taxis or cars in the street. Ma wants to say that horror and stress can make people monsters and this will make the mission or tyrannical powers easier.

Regarding the fevered as Zombies, the totalitarian Bob is afraid of their assumed power if they are unified. He is concerned about "the force of the mob, of mob mentality" (2018: 29). Despite the fact that the fevered are not hostile or savage like ordinary Zombies, "[t]hey don't attack us... If anything, we do more harm to them" (2018: 29), as Candace argues with him, Bob gives his orders to execute them. He immediately shoots them while looking into their eyes. By convincing the others, including Candace, to do the same, he proves that real monsters and Zombies are not the dead; they are actually the desperate living.

The way Bob and his group are shooting the infected because their case is hopeless sadly reminds the readers of the way healthcare professionals and facilities around the world have been forced to take the painful decision of who is going to be left to die. It also reflects another significant element of dystopian apocalyptic literature which is medical helplessness or ineffectiveness in facing pandemics. The outbreak of Coronavirus "affected the pharmaceutical supply chain ... About 60% of the world's active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) were made in China before the coronavirus outbreak." When China shut down most of its drug factories, "severe supply problems" were caused (Ozili et al. 2020:12). With the sea of

infected people during the Covid-19 crisis, hospitals are overwhelmed. There are too many infected people in the hospitals' corridors and the streets. In addition to the shortage in drug supply, there are too few doctors, nurses, and workers to take care of them. Scenes of "patients in intensive care with invasive medical Paraphernalia, exhausted and devastated healthcare workers, stacked coffins, and grieving relatives" (Grech 2020:10) become common these days. Physicians have to prioritize who are to receive ventilators, support, or breathing assistance. Unfortunately, with the limited capacity of hospitals and their emergency rooms, many sick people simply die.

As people are dying in thousands and even millions around the world and panic is a status quo, "the pandemic adds the irony of taking away from us the singularity of our own death," as El Maarouf et al. remark. "It reduces us to mere numbers, to being only one of the thousands of victims of a scourge whose origin we ignore" (2020:13). It is the same case of the fevered in the novel, who are deprived of their singular identity and become just numbers of breathing dead bodies. Most of Coronavirus and Shen Fever's victims are a direct result of an unfair system of Capitalism. They are the victims of its inhumane or unhealthy work conditions and lack of good medical insurance.

Another dystopian element that appears in *Severance* is the use of traitors and spies. The totalitarian Bob finds in Shen Fever crisis a golden chance to practice his domination obsession and ensure his arbitrary power. However, he needs traitors and spies around him, which is a well-known strategy in dystopian works. He has Adam and Todd to punish those who challenge his orders or cross his lines. There is also Evan who betrays Candace's "secret to curry Bob's favor" (2018: 221). Using these traitors and spies leads to the scheduled expansion of Bob's absolute power and control over the group members' bodies, then their minds. The presence of spies among the group members eliminates any rebelling thoughts and guarantees his total dominion. At the same time, by keeping their bodies tired and drained, there is no desire or time for their minds to think. He makes them work all day. Bob treats the group members as subjects or unthinking robots, who "have come to the Facility to work ... on the weekdays, rest on the weekends" (2018: 221). As Candace puts it:

The Facility means more to Bob than just a place to live. It is the manifestation of his shoddy ideology. He dictates and enforces the rules, rules that only he fully knows and understands. He sees us as subjects, to reward or to punish. He compliments you when he wants to control you. He doesn't see you (2018: 227)j

One of the important things tyrant leaders in a dystopian world will do is suppress the memory of those people under their control. Bob attempts to convince the group members that these memories are unreliable and should be forgotten. That is why Bob breaks Candace's mobile that includes all her documentary pictures and cuts any connection the group members have with the past. According to Bob's ideology, the members under his leadership cannot reinvent themselves in his kingdom, if they still remember their past and who they used to be. As he says to Candace, "accessing all your old data is not helpful to you in moving forward. It

is a symbol of how far you have come” (2018: 113). This reminds readers of what the Chinese authorities were doing with videos of infected people at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. They used to track and delete these videos to hide the reality of the disease intensity and control people’s panic.

Moreover, to guarantee stronger control over their victims, tyrannical leaders manipulate language. Actually, the way Chinese and American leaders in *Severance* are manipulating language and hiding dangerous facts from their people represents another significant feature of dystopian literature. Chinese leaders try hard to convince their citizens – and even the whole world - that the disease is under control and will never be a pandemic. They order their people to follow their instructions and believe the system’s news only to stay safe. They are very strict with those who try to spread different news, use doubtful language or dare to defy their orders. Bob, as a representative of the absolute American authority, tries to assure Candace and the other group members that their time-scheduled lives and blind acceptance of his orders are only for their benefit. Bob kills the group members who dare to break his orders. He also decides to lock Candace in a shop until she delivers her baby, as he suspects that she wants to escape. He does not trust her, because she can break his rules. As a tyrannical leader, Bob uses his cunning words and manipulates language to hide his real intentions. He tries to persuade Candace that it is for her own good, as “it’s very dangerous out there” (2018: 167). Candace suspects that he would kill her too after delivering her baby.

In dystopian literature, state governments and arbitrary leaders adopt children and train them to be loyal to them. Children represent the best category that will believe their manipulative language and lies and will be easier to be deceived. Children will grow up to fulfill their duties and never question the honesty of the system. In both different Chinese and American examples of societies in the novel, people have to follow and believe the authorities without negotiation. In return, they are promised a kind of utopian communism that guarantees the safety and well-being of people. However, this alleged utopia turns to be a dystopia when the controlling leaders abuse their power and enslave their peoples. Realizing Bob’s intentions and doctrine, Candace decides to run away and save her daughter, even if it was dangerous as he said. “Whatever happens to me,” as Candace thinks, “I don’t want Luna to be in this environment. I don’t want her to grow up here, in a group controlled by someone like him. I don’t want to be within his reach” (2018: 228).

Moreover, some of the elements that often appear in dystopian apocalyptic literature include “visions or dreams by seers or guides, characters in spiritual turmoil, pseudonymous authorship ... a crisis situation, a sense of ultimate hope, and signs of an end-time” (Leigh 2008:5). What really gives Candace hope for a new beginning and pushes her to get rid of Bob’s dominance and the threat is her visions of her mother. These dreams support the theme of survivorship. The mother keeps coming to her daughter to encourage her to escape. “You have to get the key, she presses. You get the key, you get the car, then you get out.... Things will change for you after you give birth” (2018: 268 – 269). These visions are the spiritual power that urges Candace to set her plan, steals Bob’s car key and runs away. She

aims for a new beginning not only for herself but also for her daughter. Finally, it is ironic that Bob who has been deciding who is fit to live and who must die ends up fevered. This gives readers hope that the world might get rid of tyrants and manipulative Capitalists.

In conclusion, this research paper aims at discussing the dystopian apocalyptic features in Ling Ma's novel, *Severance* (2018) as prophetic of the COVID-19 crisis. The appeal of Ma's *Severance* lies in its various similarities with the contemporary situation of the current pandemic that has terrified the whole world. Ma intends her dexterous debut to be a critique against the dehumanizing effect of Capitalism nowadays. She wants to shed light on the danger of the unfair global system that might transform people into robots. Though exaggerating by imagining a fever that would end humanity and destroy the world civilization, the widely destructive impact of Covid-19 makes her apocalyptic story sound plausible for many readers around the world. The novel amazingly foreshadows human behaviour in the wake of COVID-19 through its protagonist, Candace that becomes a watcher who keeps on taking photographs and recording details that have already happened these days. Candace shows how life changes to be unbearable and challenging and how going back to normalcy and dull routine become a dream after the pandemic outbreak.

In the beginning, the research discusses the origin of the dystopian apocalyptic genre in literature. Then, it analyzes certain important elements of this genre in *Severance* while examining how they foreshadow the current world pandemic. These elements include loss of individualism, tyrannical governments that are obsessed with power, the spread of plagues and pandemics, the regimented lives of citizens, especially in Capitalist societies, the use of defamiliarization technique, totalitarianism, emphasis on the theme of survivorship, medical helplessness or ineffectiveness in facing pandemics, the use of traitors and spies, suppressing the memory of common people, manipulating language, and the use of visions or dreams. In this way, the research proves that Ling Ma's dystopian apocalyptic novel is a fictional predictor that becomes true.

Soha A. Helmy  
Department of English Language and Literature  
Tanta University, Egypt  
Taibah University, KSA  
ORCID Number:  
[drsohahelmy@yahoo.com](mailto:drsohahelmy@yahoo.com)

## References

- Aaltola, Mika.** (2020). 'COVID-19 – A trigger for global transformation? political distancing, global decoupling and growing distrust in health governance'. *FIIA Working Paper*, 113: 4-14. [https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/wp\\_113\\_covid-19\\_a-trigger-for-globaltransformation.pdf](https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/wp_113_covid-19_a-trigger-for-globaltransformation.pdf). (Retrieved on 14 May, 2020).
- Alihodžić, Demir and Selma Jerković.** (2016). *The Boundaries of Dystopian Literature: The Genre in Context*. Tuzla: OFF-SET d.o.o.
- Booker, M. Keith.** (1994). *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*. Connecticut: Greenwood P.
- DiTommaso, Lorenzo.** (2014). 'Apocalypticism and popular culture'. In John J. Collins (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, 473-509. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- El Maarouf, Moulay Driss, Taieb Belghazi and Farouk El Maarouf.** (2020). 'COVID–19: A critical ontology of the present'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(1): 71-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1757426>. (Retrieved on 17 June, 2020).
- Foucault, Michel.** (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Grech, Victor.** (2020). 'Pandemics: Known unknowns and our failure to prevent our unwilling participation in a dystopian SF scenario'. *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, 350: 1-12.
- Heller, Ágnes and Riccardo Mazzeo.** (2019). *Wind and Whirlwind: Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Literature and Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill.
- Houfková, Kateřina.** (2019). 'The warning function of post-apocalyptic science fiction'. *Messages, Sages and Ages*, 6 (1): 59-65.
- Kateb, George.** (1963). *Utopia and Its Enemies*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Leigh, David J.** (2008). *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P.
- Lumpkin, Joseph B.** (2010). *The Encyclopedia of Lost and Rejected Scriptures: The Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha*. Texas: Fifth Estate.
- Ma, Ling.** (2018). *Severance*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Moylan, Tom.** (2000). *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder: Westview P.
- Ozili, Peterson and Thankom Arun.** (2020). 'Spillover of COVID-19: Impact on the global economy'. *Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA)*, no. 998502020: 1-27. <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/99850>. (Retrieved on 18 August, 2020).
- Baccolini, Raffaella and Tom Moylan. (eds.)** (2003). 'Dystopia and histories'. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, 1-12. New York and London: Routledge.
- Riesman, David.** (1964). *Abundance for What? And Other Essays*. London: Chatto & Windus.

- Turku, Marsela.** (2016). 'Reality versus fiction: The truth behind a utopian/dystopian novel'. *BJES*, 13 (1): 54-63.
- Varsam, Maria.** (2003). 'Concrete dystopia: Slavery and its others'. In Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, 203-224. New York and London: Routledge.
- Walsh, Chad.** (1962). *From Utopia to Nightmare*. New York: Harper & Row.