



Cyclone of Horror and Violence in Male and Female Agencies in High-Rise

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ABSTRACT

Dystopian fiction and the imagined world depicted in J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* have attracted the attention of neo-Marxist critics around the globe. The world in *High-Rise* is an example of a collapsed capitalist society which has degenerated internally. The hegemony is kept on the surface as positive sign of a system which apparently functions normally. However, a closer analysis of the female agencies in the novel indicates that these characters are doubly commodified by the system. This paper seeks to examine the status of the female characters in comparison with the male ones within the machine system of the building.

Keywords: Ballard, *High-Rise*, Dystopia, Female Agency, Neo-Marxism.

Introduction

Ballard tells us that his characters seek salvation and to this end they might create their own mythologies. He tells Green Revell that "a lot of his fiction is "open-ended". He claims that "I leave for the reader to decide what the moral and psychological conclusions to be drawn from my fiction should be." *High Rise* (1975) by Ballard can be taken as a good example for analysis as an open-ended work. The characters in *High Rise* living in a super-modern apartment block which can symbolize a capitalist society.

Related Literature Review

Literary scholars and critics have for the recent years had various views about the thematic value of J.G. Ballard's works as one of the contemporary and controversial writers both in Britain and outside. The books and researches on Ballard are not numerous but those which have been published in the last three decades have focused on various aspects of this less known writer, ranging from psychology to posthumanism. In what follows, the researcher seeks to refer to the most important researches published and available to her.

Erica Moore (2011) in her PhD dissertation entitled "Practising the Posthumanities: Evolutionary Animals, Machines and the Posthuman in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard and Kurt Vonnegut" takes a comparative approach to Ballard and Vonnegut and demonstrates how some of the selected works by Ballard including *High-Rise* (1975) can be studied from Posthumanistic lens. She conjures that man as 'machine' and man as an 'evolutionary human animal' are the products of technology and Ballard can be regarded as one of the pioneers of posthuman subjects.

Pedro Henrique dos Santos Groppo (2014) in a research for accomplishing his PhD dissertation reads the selected works of Ballard in light of cultural trauma and thus takes a psychological approach to the selected works. As the title of the dissertation suggests,

"Post-temporal Subjectivity in the Fiction of J. G. Ballard", death's interactibility, according to Groppo, is a consequence of post-temporal subjectivity rooted in traumas of the Second World War.

In "Reading Posture and Gesture in Ballard's Novels", Dan O'Hara (2012) emphasizes on the importance of characters in Ballard's fiction. She claims that whatever the strengths of Ballard may be, the fact that he cannot create credible characters is a vital commonplace. Critics of all kinds were less than optimistic about his ability to convincingly interpret, generally treating his characters either as dead wood or as hollow spokespeople for Ballard's own views.

Brief Plot Summary

High Rise, as the title might suggest, is a story of a forty-story building and Ballard narrates the lives of its residents. Generally speaking, high rise buildings represent modern type of life. They also might represent different social classes. The building in Ballard's novel is seemingly a self-reliant one which contains restaurant, bank, roof garden and some other leisure facilities such as a gym. The people inside the building come from different professions with various income levels. Ballard symbolically refers to the residents and their social class by the floors they live in: the lower floor is resided by workers, airline stewardesses and some other assistant jobs. In the second floor, as the reader is informed, lives Richard Wilder, who produces television. In the middle floors, there are other professions like psychologists and other high-status people such as dentists. In the twenty fifth floor another character whose name is Robert Laing lives. Laing is a lecturer who has recently got divorced from his wife and lives alone. The top floors are occupied by physicians and architects. Anthony Royal, the designer of the building, lives at the top floor.

A critical look at the structure of the building reminds the reader of a class system. From a Marxist critic perspective, whenever classes live, class struggles and antagonism might show itself. There are causes of anger in the building: use of elevators, air conditioning or lighting outages create disputes among the residents of different floors. The disputes proceed to the extent of threat of life and residents decide to close up themselves in their buildings especially at night because the power is out when it gets dark.

In such a skirmish, some people die for not receiving food or necessary medications, and some others are brutally killed. One of the residents Laing is responsible for taking care of his sister. He admires the situation for he thinks that this means the disappearance of civilization along with all its restrictions. Wilder, the television producer, decides to go to the top part of the building and in his attempt he kills one of the residents on his way. There are some women who want to keep the signs of civilization, stop Wilder.

According to Mark Fisher, it was the circumstances of the seventies in America that caused the writing of the book. This view is a Marxist one as Carl Marx writes in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (2). This means that it is the structure of the building of the High Rise that creates the consciousness of the building's residents. The very structure of the building and the way residents are shown by Ballard represent a hierarchy. If the novel is read from a Marxist critic view, the seventies was the time of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism, according to Britannica Online dictionary, is "ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition. Although there is considerable debate as to the defining features of neoliberal thought and practice, it is most commonly associated with laissez-faire economics." In other words, the social goal in neoliberalism, is removing regulations and in this respect, the chaos in the high-rise building can be an example of reification.

Relentless Violence and Irregularities in Capitalism

In a capitalist society, controls on a system disinvolvement are signs of liberalism. Stephen Graham in his critical essay entitled "Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction", analyses some urban fiction examples including Ballard's High-Rise. He states that "Urban science fiction has offered up imagined cities that operate about remarkably similar and highly verticalized visions" (382). What Graham suggests is that if social reality can have effect on literature, literature is also able to affect the reality as such. This can be seen in the architecture of the building in High-Rise. As a high-rise building, according to Graham, the construction has been probably inspired by the real building, namely Balfron Tower. The building consists of twenty-six storeys and is located in the East London. The building is famous for what is known among architectures as a Brutalist. It was designed in 1963. In architecture, Brutalist styles are characterized by minimalism and are generally considered as a reaction to the nostalgia style of architecture in 1940s. As stated before, this kind of building in the novel, the idea of which probably has been borrowed from a real one, can be regarded as a sign of neoliberalism. In other words, the very structure of the building in High-Rise invites the Marxist critic to take it as suggestive of neoliberalism.

Yet, another characteristic of neoliberalism is economic strictness that governments and states apply and utilize in their systems in order to reduce public expenditure. This goal, on the surface seems suitable and beneficial for the society, but when it is analyzed and examined more carefully, as David Harvey argues, the strictness is done for the lower class people. Harvey in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) notes that neoliberalism is a "political project to reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (76). This can be interpreted as the working of neoliberalism in favor of laissez faire which economically means abstention by governments from interfering in the workings of the free market. To Ballard, High-Rise as a building, is a "huge machine to serve, not to the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation" (386). It seems

that Ballard uses the structure of the building to conceptualize the capitalist society and war in class structures. In other words, the building plays the role of the central protagonist.

As stated earlier, the story begins and ends with Laing's narrative. Through this character's narrative, Ballard puts two other characters: Wilder and Royal. Artistically and intelligently, Ballard contrasts the two characters' view toward life which can be interpreted through the lens of capitalism and neoliberal theory. Laing thinks that things will be 'ideal', while Wilder believes that things "do not work out" well. Laing considers the building as a system or machine that represents social order with the complex system of the apartment. The residents of the apartment are controlled by this very system or machine that provides them ways to act more instinctively without any control, which Laing considers it as an ideal form. Ballard in one of his interviews states that *High-Rise* is a kind of 'laboratory'.

Ballard contrasts Laing's point of view with that of Wilder's. Wilder, the reader is informed, contrary to Laing, has children. Laing, after going to different parties and attending various entertainments in the building, comes to the conclusion that the building and its architecture causes psychological effect on the residents. He says "the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all" (36). He continues speculating on the nature of the building and comes up with the point that the building has some hidden secrets that lead the residents towards "free psychopathology" (36). From Laing's point of view, he is entangled between two choices which are both evil. He sees the future dominated by people who are essentially similar to his neighbors who are "cool, unemotional personalities" (35). On the other side, he foresees the future containing people who are impulsive and paranoid.

Wilder, the opposing character who was introduced earlier, is seemingly more multidimensional character. He works at two poles of humanity: animalistic and reasonable. He is the only character in the novel who has perception like an animal. Wilder, contrary to Laing who is childless, is both a husband and father. He wishes to revenge at the building and its architecture. To him, residents who live in the upper floors are numb and deprived of responsiveness. Ballard writes:

What angered Wilder, most about life in the apartment building was the way in which an apparently homogenous collection of high-income professional people had split into three distinct and hostile camps. The old social subdivisions, based on power, capital and self-interest, had reasserted themselves as anywhere else (53).

The reader is informed that Wilder intends to make a movie (which is never made). Wilder thinks that by making the movie he can show the class consciousness. The reader reads as "In essence, then, the film will be a propaganda piece, a means to strengthen the group identity of Wilder's fellow lower floor" (54). In the final chapter, the reader learns that Wilder decides to leave his family. He provides some reasons for this decision by saying that his wife is a very passive woman and his children are only "hungry" children that need to be fed. The story of Wilder ends with no family. It can be suggested that in a capitalist society where the only thing that matters is money, family and its construction is easily shattered into pieces. From a new Marxist perspective, bourgeois cultural hegemony is responsible for this.

From a neo-Marxist critic point of view, *High-Rise* focuses on class and its relation to alignment and structure of space-time. In this view, time experiences are connected to the production conditions. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the working classes are no longer the same as its old and traditional meaning in the time of industrialization. In its modern definition, working class means everyone "whose labor is exploited by capital, the entire cooperating multitude" (402). Thus, if men in the building are causing anger and skirmish, it is because the capitalist system exerts its power in a hidden way to exploit.

Female Agency and Commodification in the High-Rise

In the previous section, the researcher cast a critical look at male characters in the *High-Rise* as a post-war dystopian novel. The novel is a depiction of social degeneration. The male characters struggle constantly to dominate each other. This analysis will be more comprehensive provided that the state of the female characters is included. In what follows, the researcher seeks to scrutinize the major female characters and their conditions in the machine-system of capitalism as in the building.

The opening sentences of the *High-Rise* connote the disruption in a Dystopian space: "Later, as he sat on his balcony, eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building, during the three previous months" (1). "Eating the dog" is connotative of abnormality and can be regarded as a foreshadowing technique by Ballard to reveal the end of the story beforehand. The reader, hence, expects irregularities and chaos to come next. The reader later learns that the building is not for the poor since it contains many facilities such as "swimming pool and a well-stocked liquor store". While the three aforementioned male characters represent a different class, the three female ones have similar functions, that is, to represent social class as well. The female characters are Charlotte Melville, Helen, Wilder's wife, and Ann Royal, who is the wife of the architect. Ballard describes the female characters to the reader through the lens of male ones. In other words, women are subordinate to men. Laing the male figure describes Helen, his wife, as "a pale young woman with a post graduate degree who reviewed children's books for literary weeklies seemed permanently exhausted" (12).

Helen, as a mother and wife, after seeing the practice of violence from the side of her husband changes, for she experiences adverse and deleterious things such as an air conditioning system which produces dust or she experiences the closure of schools which is not desirable to her. She is not able to sleep and this accelerates her state of exhaustion. She, as her husband believes, is nearly passive and wants her husband to leave the building, but to no avail. In one scene, Helen and her son are found in the middle of a party held by the building's upper levels. Royal, who is the head of the party, is surprised by seeing Helen and asserts "how easily this intelligent woman had fitted easily into the upper levels of the high-rise" (189). Her husband, instead, in search of food as a result of its shortage and scarcity in the building, has left them and is not present. Her husband's absence has caused Helen to be "molested" or mistreated by so many men in the building. The patriarchal system in a capitalist society abuses women and commodifies them for their own benefits. She earns her living now by being a servant. The brief description about Helen is revealing and suggestive as the picture of a female agency. She is a passive woman who is playing the role of a traditional mother by taking care of her sons in the absence of the husband. As stated earlier, her husband leaves her, and now and then she becomes a different self. Ballard writes:

"She had been a bright and self-confident producer's assistant, more than a match for Wilder with her quick tongue...After the combination of the two boys and a year in the high-rise, she was withdrawing into herself, obsessively wrapped up with children's most elementary activities. Even her reviewing of the children's books was part of the same retreat" (58).

Helen's agency is confined to her care and attention she gives to her children. However, when men are struggling for domination, and when the schools have been closed since her husband left them for a new shooting, she changes her mind and attitude and accordingly her agency is turned into a leader. Now she goes to the top floor which is a connotative and symbolic action. It might mean an upgrade to her position in the story just as a conventional woman as a mother.

The next female character to be analyzed is an active mother who is also able to seduce men. The reader is introduced to Charlotte Melville. As a copywriter, she lives in the middle section of the high-rise. Aged thirty-five, she is introduced as a widow who woos men and attracts their attention. In a scene, she is able to win Laing. She is conscious of the conflict which is going to happen in the building. Although in trouble, she dates with Laing and in some cases she calls him with his first name as Robert which might indicate intimacy.

Charlotte appears as an intelligent smart woman who thinks she is able to do whatever she intends; however, she is ignored by Laing. The problem is that she does not stay with one man and after being ignored by Laing, she looks for another man. Laing believes that she another man and struggles to find someone to "bring out her forcefulness and girt" (137). Once she returns to get food from her apartment, she is raped by Wilder. Although she is a woman, her agency is an intelligent one who feels responsible to protect her son. Going from one man to another is an indicator of an opportunistic and attaching woman. She, as trained in a capitalist system and living in the building, looks for men who are more beneficial for her. Even when she is raped, the reader hunches that it was not a rape since she implicitly encourages Wilder to do so. She joins the group of women in the building and claims her independence from men. However, there is a little form of detachment in her that can be read as the effect of violence in the building.

The third woman in the *High-Rise* novel that the researcher intends to analyze is Anne Royal who lives on the top floor of the building. She is not satisfied with her life and when the violence begins, she decides to leave. Her husband explains her as:

...Royal knew now, his young wife would never be happy in the special atmosphere of the high-rise. The only daughter of a provincial industrialist, she had been brought up in the insulated world of a large country house, ... maintained by a staff of servants in the full-blown nineteenth-century manner (98-99).

The way the husband explains his wife reemphasizes the structure of the building as the creator of the differences between male and female characters. Ann is a member of the women's community which has been held by women of the building. She appears as someone who is not able to tolerate the difficulties of life. However, at the end of the novel she changes and accepts that the difficulties are part of life. What makes her similar to other two female characters, namely Helen and Charlotte, are twofold. One is her desire to leave the building. The other one is her inability to decide which shows her agency is not so much improved.

In a capitalist society like the one depicted in the *High-Rise* as Ballard depicts is that the female characters do not feel secure both physically and mentally. Ideologies present themselves as natural as possible because they, in order to guarantee their hegemony and domination among the individuals, fear revolutions. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* (2014) argues that

"It is natural for men to hold leadership positions because their biological superiority renders them more physically, intellectually, and emotionally capable than women is a sexist ideology that sells itself as a function of nature, rather than as a product of cultural belief. Every family wants to own its own home on its own land" is a capitalist ideology that sells itself as natural by pointing, for example, to the fact that almost all Americans want to own their own property, without acknowledging that this desire is created in us by the capitalist culture in which we live (56).

In an ideological sphere like the one in the High-Rise, female subjects are regarded as a sex that are not strong. In such patriarchal ideology, women are weak, and in the novel as an example of capitalist society, from a neo-Marxist perspective, women by losing their individual agencies, attach themselves to men and collective activities. In some cases, they feel safe to be in their own communities to keep themselves free from violence and danger. The related question to violence and its exertion in a capitalist system is justice. Justice as the subcategory of morality is propagated and must be justified. "In social or political context", Reisman writes, "justice means that every person gets no more, and no less, than what he gains through voluntary association with other men. A capitalist society is a just society because all individuals are considered equal under the law. However, in Ballard's depiction of the machine-system society, justice is never defined clearly. Inside the building are characters that are detached from the outer society and are presented as isolated figures. The occupants decide to divide themselves into various classes. The two-thousand neighbors of the building struggle to detach themselves from the other ones. Laing, who struggles for tranquility, intends to be away from the building's disputes and arguments, but he cannot achieve his goal.

Conclusion: Subjects as Freedom Seekers

In a neo-Marxist system, subjects are seeking freedom and try to be away from classical form of revolution or what they call Red revolutions. Ballard constantly depicts a sociopolitical society which contains "cool unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy who thrived like an advanced species of machine" (46). This way of living is explicitly mentioned by Wilder. He believes that living in the building needs certain type of conduct such as being mad. This means that the characters, like Wilder, are already dead but they pretend to be happy and free.

Helen stats that "Everything is fine. There is some slide trouble with the air conditioning, but is being fixed (140). The reader knows that this is contrary to reality and Ballard through irony of situation conveys his message to the reader. Helen, the reader is informed, is experiencing a very tense type of life in a capitalist society. The building resembles a zoo occupied by human beings and if they have any degrees of freedom, it is used for attacking each other.

Not all the characters are pretentious ones. There are some minor characters who know the very nature of reality within the building.

The only open space turns out to be someone else's car-park. By the way, doctor, I'm planning to do a television documentary about high rises, a really hard look at the physical and psychological pressures of living in a huge condominium such as this one. You'll have a lot of material. (13)

The occupants are happy and content as long as the building provides them the basic needs. However, since in a capitalist system the immediate needs are welcome, happiness cannot last long. Oppressive ideologies hold us back, masquerading as a natural way of seeing the world from an understanding of the physical/historical conditions in which we live since They refuse to admit that conditions have any effect on the road we see the world. Marxism, a non-repressive ideology, recognizes that it is an ideology or doctrine.

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