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Dystopia, Political Violence and the Loss of Freedom in Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*

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Abstract:

Paul Lynch's Prophet Song (2023) presents the gradual collapse of democratic institutions and the emergence of authoritarian rule through the experiences of Eilish Stack and her family. This paper examines the novel as a dystopian representation of political violence, state surveillance, the suspension of civil liberties, family separation, displacement, and the erosion of everyday normality. Rather than presenting political violence only through spectacular scenes of warfare, Lynch locates authoritarianism in ordinary spaces: the family home, streets, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and public institutions. The arrest of Larry, the disappearance of Mark, the death of Bailey, the restriction of movement, shortages, curfews, and Eilish's eventual displacement demonstrate how political power enters private life and gradually destroys individual agency. The paper also considers Lynch's technique of realism and his stated intention to create "radical empathy" with refugees and civilians caught in political catastrophe. Read alongside George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, Susan Sontag's reflections on representations of suffering, and Zygmunt Bauman's study of displaced populations, Prophet Song can be understood as a contemporary dystopian text concerned with the fragility of freedom and the human consequences of authoritarianism. The study argues that Lynch's novel transforms political crisis into an intimate human experience and demonstrates that the loss of freedom is gradual, cumulative, and deeply personal.

Keywords: Prophet Song; Paul Lynch; Dystopia; Political Violence; Authoritarianism; State Surveillance; Loss of Freedom; Displacement; Migration; Family Separation; Democracy; Refugee Experience.

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Introduction:

Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* is a contemporary dystopian novel that examines the consequences of democratic collapse and authoritarian government through the experience of an ordinary family. The uploaded article identifies the novel's central concerns as "Dystopia, Political Violence and the Loss of Freedom," particularly focusing on state monitoring, authoritarian control, political violence, family separation, and displacement. These concerns are interconnected: as political institutions become authoritarian, individual freedoms diminish; as freedoms diminish, family relationships become vulnerable; and as violence intensifies, displacement becomes a condition of survival.

Prophet Song was published in 2023 and won the Booker Prize that year. The Booker Prize identifies it as Lynch's fifth novel and describes it as a portrait of a country and family "on the brink of catastrophe." The novel follows Eilish Stack, a scientist and mother of four, whose husband Larry becomes involved with a teachers' union resisting government interference. His detention becomes the first major disruption in the family's ordinary existence. From this point, Eilish's domestic life becomes inseparable from the political crisis surrounding her.

The dystopian character of the novel emerges not from a distant imaginary future but from the transformation of familiar democratic institutions. A new government introduces "Emergency Powers," a secret police organisation operates through surveillance and detention, protests are criminalised, movement becomes restricted, supplies become scarce, and violence becomes normalised. The Booker Prize reading guide notes that the novel presents an Ireland "sliding further and further into authoritarian rule" and that personal freedoms are progressively eroded. Lynch himself has described his purpose as an attempt to "see into the modern chaos" and has connected the novel to unrest in Western democracies, Syria, refugee crises, and the problem of political indifference.

Dystopian Elements in Prophet Song:

Dystopian fiction traditionally imagines social systems in which political, technological, ideological, or institutional power severely restricts human freedom. Prophet Song uses this tradition while also resisting the distance often associated with speculative dystopia. Lynch has explicitly stated that he wanted to "dismantle the form of the dystopian novel" because the realities represented in the novel were already occurring elsewhere in the world. He described the book's method as realism rather than pure speculation. This approach is important because the novel does not ask readers to imagine an impossible future; it asks them to recognise how familiar social and political conditions can develop into catastrophe.

The novel begins with a seemingly ordinary domestic encounter that gradually becomes threatening. Two GNSB officers arrive at the Stack family home looking for Larry. The uploaded article rightly identifies the "sharp, insistent rapping" (1) as an early sign of state intrusion into private life. The importance of this moment lies in its ordinariness. Authoritarianism does not initially arrive as open warfare; it enters through the front door, through officials who claim institutional authority. The private home, which normally represents security, becomes vulnerable to the state.

This movement from ordinary life to political terror is central to the dystopian structure of the novel. The Booker Prize judges emphasised that the story forces readers out of complacency by following Eilish as Ireland descends into totalitarianism. The judges also described the novel as depicting state violence and displacement without easy consolation.

State Monitoring and Authoritarian Control:

The introduction of the GNSB establishes the relationship between surveillance and political control. Larry's involvement with the teachers' union becomes sufficient to place him under suspicion, and his subsequent detention demonstrates how emergency legislation can weaken ordinary legal protections. The novel therefore shows authoritarianism as a process in which exceptional powers gradually become normalised.

The phrase "Emergency Powers"(10) is particularly significant because the language of emergency can transform extraordinary political measures into apparently legitimate actions. Once emergency becomes permanent, citizens are expected to accept restrictions that would previously have been regarded as unacceptable. Arrests without ordinary legal safeguards, surveillance of citizens, restrictions on movement, and suppression of protest gradually become features of everyday life.

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provides an important comparative framework. Orwell writes, "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows."(81). The quotation links political freedom with the ability to maintain an independent relationship with truth. In *Prophet Song*, authoritarian control similarly attempts to determine what citizens may say, do, and believe. Larry's political action is transformed into an alleged threat to the state, demonstrating how authoritarian power can redefine dissent as criminality.

The novel's treatment of surveillance also recalls Orwell's representation of a society in which private life is continuously exposed to political power. Yet Lynch's emphasis is less on elaborate technological surveillance and more on the practical mechanisms of fear: police presence, detention, checkpoints, curfews, shortages, military force, and uncertainty. The result is a society in which people begin to regulate their own behaviour because they cannot know where the state's authority begins or ends.

Political Violence and the Loss of Freedom:

Political violence in Prophet Song is not confined to formal battles. It is experienced through arrest, disappearance, intimidation, bombing, shortages, curfews, physical injury, and the destruction of neighbourhoods. The novel's violence becomes most powerful when it enters everyday life. Citizens cannot safely use streets, schools, shops, hospitals, or other public spaces. The uploaded article emphasises that the government's control extends into ordinary activities, making basic survival increasingly difficult.

This gradual destruction of ordinary life is crucial to the novel's understanding of freedom. Freedom is not represented only as the right to vote or protest; it includes the ability to move, work, educate children, visit relatives, obtain food, seek medical treatment, and live without fear. Once these ordinary freedoms disappear, political oppression becomes a lived

condition rather than an abstract constitutional problem.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a useful comparative perspective. Aunt Lydia explains, "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from."(24). This distinction is relevant to Prophet Song because Eilish loses both forms of freedom. She loses freedom to act according to her own choices, and she also loses freedom from state violence, surveillance, and fear. Her choices increasingly become responses to external threats rather than expressions of genuine agency.

The arrest and disappearance of Larry mark the beginning of this loss of agency. Eilish initially hopes that legal procedures, negotiation, or ordinary social mechanisms might restore her husband. As the crisis deepens, however, those mechanisms become ineffective. Her role changes from wife and mother living within a functioning democracy to a person responsible for making survival decisions under authoritarian conditions.

Family Separation and the Destruction of Domestic Security:

Family is the emotional centre of Prophet Song. Eilish's political struggle is inseparable from her responsibility toward her children. The disappearance of Larry removes a major source of emotional and practical support, forcing Eilish to make decisions alone. Her family therefore becomes a measure of the political crisis: as the state becomes more violent, the family becomes more fragmented.

The consequences extend to the children. Mark's involvement with the rebellion, his disappearance, and Bailey's eventual death demonstrate how authoritarian violence affects younger generations. The government's attempts to recruit or control young people show that authoritarian power seeks not only political obedience from adults but also control over the future.

Bailey's injury, transfer to a military hospital, torture, and death represent one of the most devastating moments in the novel. His death demonstrates the collapse of the state's responsibility to protect civilians. Institutions that should provide safety become instruments of violence. The hospital, traditionally associated with healing, becomes associated with torture and death. This reversal of institutional meaning is a significant dystopian feature.

The family's fragmentation also demonstrates that political violence has psychological consequences beyond physical injury. Eilish must simultaneously confront uncertainty about Larry, fear for Mark, grief over Bailey, responsibility for her other children, and concern for her elderly father. Political violence therefore produces a continuous burden of emotional labour. The state's violence is reproduced inside the family as anxiety, silence, grief, and separation.

Curfews, Shortages and the Collapse of Everyday Life:

The novel's dystopian atmosphere is strengthened by the collapse of ordinary infrastructure. Bombed streets, damaged neighbourhoods, electricity shortages, water shortages, food shortages, and curfews transform the familiar city into an environment of insecurity. These details are important because dystopia is constructed not only through political institutions but also through the destruction of daily routines.

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Eilish's inability to visit her father because of restrictions on movement illustrates how authoritarian politics affects family care. The political crisis enters the most intimate responsibilities of ordinary life. Her concern is no longer simply whether the government is legitimate; she must decide how to obtain food, protect children, reach family members, and respond to immediate danger.

Susan Sontag's Regarding the Pain of Others is useful in understanding the relationship between violence, spectatorship, and desensitisation. Sontag observes that modern life provides "countless opportunities for regarding (at a distance …) horrors taking place throughout the world"(3) and asks whether repeated exposure produces indifference or heightened concern. Prophet Song counters such distance by placing readers close to Eilish's experience. Instead of presenting political violence as distant news, Lynch makes it part of the reader's intimate encounter with a mother attempting to protect her family.

This technique corresponds with Lynch's stated aim of creating "radical empathy." He explained that he wanted readers not merely to know about the refugee problem but to feel it through immersion in the novel's reality. The novel's close focus on Eilish therefore becomes a formal strategy for overcoming the emotional distance associated with repeated images of distant conflict.

Displacement, Migration and the Refugee Experience:

The destruction of Eilish's home eventually forces her to consider leaving Ireland. Displacement becomes the final consequence of the progressive loss of freedom. When a state can no longer provide safety and when ordinary institutions have become sources of danger, migration becomes a survival strategy rather than a free choice.

Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* provides a useful theoretical context for understanding this process. Bauman argues that modernization produces "superfluous" populations of migrants, refugees, and other outcasts(5) and describes this as a consequence of modern systems of order and economic development. In *Prophet Song*, displacement similarly reveals how political catastrophe transforms citizens into refugees. Eilish and her children do not leave simply because they desire a different life; they leave because the conditions required for ordinary life have been destroyed.

The refugee experience is therefore closely connected to the loss of citizenship as a meaningful source of protection. A person may remain legally connected to a homeland while becoming physically unsafe within it. The novel exposes the contradiction between national belonging and actual security: Eilish is at home in Ireland, yet Ireland becomes a place from which she must escape.

Lynch has acknowledged that the refugee crisis was central to his intention. He connected the novel to Syria, the collapse of nations, refugee movements, and Western indifference. He also explained that the novel began as a way of asking how a democratic act could be distinguished from an act against the state. This makes Prophet Song particularly relevant to contemporary discussions of migration, political persecution, and the fragility of democratic citizenship.

Democracy, Fear and the Erosion of Agency:

One of the novel's most significant achievements is its representation of the gradual erosion of agency. Eilish does not suddenly lose all freedom. Instead, each political development narrows the range of choices available to her. Initially she can seek information and legal assistance. Later she must negotiate restrictions, shortages, threats, and violence. Eventually survival itself becomes the primary objective.

Lynch has said that he wanted the novel to explore "the nature of force, problems of choice and free will, and to pose questions about human dignity." These concerns are visible in Eilish's decisions. Her choices are technically her own, yet the conditions surrounding those choices are increasingly coercive. The novel therefore raises an important distinction between formal choice and meaningful freedom.

The destruction of democratic institutions also demonstrates how quickly political norms can be transformed. Once emergency measures are introduced, opposition becomes suspicious, protest becomes criminalised, and violence becomes administratively justified. The novel does not present authoritarianism as a single event; it represents it as a sequence of changes that citizens may initially interpret as temporary. This gradualism makes the dystopia more disturbing because it suggests that democratic collapse can occur through incremental changes in ordinary institutions.

The Booker Prize judges similarly emphasised the novel's warning about the "precarity of democratic ideals." The term is particularly appropriate because the novel's central concern is not simply that democracy can disappear, but that democratic freedoms depend upon institutions and social practices that must continually be protected.

Lynch's Narrative Technique and the Experience of Dystopia:

The formal structure of Prophet Song contributes substantially to its representation of political crisis. The novel is written with long sentences and without conventional paragraph breaks, creating a continuous flow of perception. The Booker Prize reading guide highlights this unusual structure and notes that the narrative remains closely aligned with Eilish's consciousness. This technique reduces the distance between reader and protagonist.

The absence of conventional paragraph breaks can also be interpreted as a representation of psychological pressure. Eilish has little opportunity to step outside the crisis and reflect from a secure distance. Events accumulate, one after another, and the prose reproduces that accumulation. Political violence therefore becomes not merely an event represented by the narrative but an experience reproduced through its form.

The narrative's close focus on Eilish also supports Lynch's aim of exploring individual agency within enormous political forces. He has explained that the novel had to remain centred on Eilish and on the "hidden life of unrecorded acts," asking how much agency an individual possesses when caught within forces larger than herself. This perspective prevents the novel from becoming merely a political allegory. The political crisis matters because it is experienced through the intimate decisions of a mother.

The novel's style therefore connects political structure with personal consciousness. State power appears through Eilish's perception

of doors, streets, hospitals, food supplies, soldiers, checkpoints, and family members. The result is a form of dystopian realism in which political collapse becomes inseparable from everyday perception.

Prophet Song and the Contemporary Dystopian Tradition:

Prophet Song can be placed in conversation with major dystopian works such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Orwell examines surveillance, ideological control, and the destruction of independent truth; Atwood explores the political regulation of bodies, gender, and freedom. Lynch shares their concern with the erosion of individual agency but shifts the emphasis toward political violence, family survival, displacement, and refugee experience.

The comparison with Orwell is particularly useful because both novels depict the transformation of language and law into instruments of control. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, political authority attempts to control truth itself. In Prophet Song, the state changes the legal and political conditions through which citizens understand dissent. In both cases, authoritarianism seeks not merely obedience but the destruction of independent civic agency.

Atwood's distinction between "freedom to" and "freedom from" also illuminates Eilish's predicament. Her freedom to move, work, speak, organise, and protect her family diminishes at the same time that she loses freedom from fear and state violence.

Sontag's work provides another useful perspective because Prophet Song is concerned with how readers encounter distant suffering. Lynch's stated goal of "radical empathy" responds to the problem Sontag identifies: the possibility that repeated representations of suffering can create distance rather than understanding. By concentrating on one family, Lynch transforms an abstract political crisis into a sustained emotional experience.

Conclusion:

Prophet Song presents dystopia not as a remote imaginary future but as the gradual transformation of ordinary democratic life into a system of surveillance, political violence, fear, deprivation, and displacement. Through Eilish Stack's experience, Paul Lynch demonstrates how authoritarianism enters private life and progressively reduces individual agency. The arrest of Larry, the disappearance of Mark, the death of Bailey, restrictions on movement, shortages, curfews, military violence, and eventual displacement collectively reveal the consequences of democratic collapse.

The novel's most important contribution to dystopian literature lies in its emphasis on ordinary life. Political violence is shown through homes, schools, hospitals, streets, family relationships, and basic necessities rather than through battles alone. This makes the loss of freedom tangible. Eilish's struggle demonstrates that freedom is experienced through everyday capacities: the ability to speak, move, work, care for family, seek medical help, and live without fear.

Lynch's own comments confirm that the novel was shaped by contemporary political realities, including the unrest in Western democracies and the global refugee crisis. His intention to create "radical empathy" explains the novel's close focus on Eilish and its immersive narrative technique. The novel therefore combines political analysis with

intimate storytelling. It asks readers to understand political catastrophe not simply as a historical or geographical event but as a condition that transforms ordinary human relationships.

Ultimately, Prophet Song demonstrates the fragility of democratic freedom and the human cost of authoritarian rule. Its dystopian power comes from the recognition that catastrophe develops through a series of apparently manageable changes until normal life becomes impossible. The novel thus functions as both a literary representation of political violence and an exploration of the emotional consequences of displacement, loss, and powerlessness. Eilish's struggle to protect her family makes the larger political crisis comprehensible at the level of individual experience, while the family's displacement reveals how the destruction of political freedom can ultimately transform citizens into refugees.

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