

Ruling the Lawless: Rise of Authoritarianism in Times of Crisis in Ling Ma's *Severance*

Incihan Hotaman

Research Assistant

Dept. of English Language & Literature

Cappadocia University

Nevşehir (Turkey)

incihan.hotaman@kapadokya.edu.tr

Abstract

*The existence of a political authority is such a customary part of our daily lives that often we are able to ignore and even forget it. However, only when we imagine its absence from our lives via post-apocalyptic fiction, we realize the importance of a democratically chosen and built governance over what would have been an authoritarian rule. Similarly, Ling Ma's first novel *Severance* with the eerie similarity of its events to the Coronavirus pandemic, is one of those works that shows us the unadulterated social and political chaos emerging from the lack of a central government or authority, through the story of nine survivors of a globally destructive disease. Moreover, since the emergence of an authoritarian rule during times of crisis is one of the key elements found in *Severance*, this paper aims to examine and analyze the ways in which the power of the leader turns into an authoritarian control during a global pandemic that resulted in the annihilation of almost all humanity.*

Keywords: *Post-Apocalyptic Novel, Authoritarianism, Biopolitics*

Being a part of a society more often than not includes being a part of a political system that expects its subjects to follow a certain way of life through the guidelines it sets in lieu of laws, which is a fact we do not actively acknowledge frequently in our daily lives. If we are lucky, the existence of an authoritative control over our lives is not made apparent; however, in times of crisis, economic or social problems, our attention is forcibly drawn to the authoritative powers we live by. The unfortunate yet undeniable existence of an authoritarian rule is an important discussion topic for today's world; especially when we come across deeply moving works like *Until We Are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran* by Shirin Ebadi who is the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, or *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* by Svetlana Alexievich, another Nobel Laureate (the Nobel Prize for Literature, 2015) who depicts the unheard, yet authentic voices of people who witnessed the collapse of the authoritarian Soviet rule. As art mimics life, the appearance of authoritarianism in fictional literary works is to be expected and even welcomed, thanks to works such as *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez that takes place during the Trujillo dictatorship in Dominican Republic, or *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang that portrays some oppressive social customs of the age through the life stories of three generations of women. Moreover, when we look at our own world today, we find ourselves questioning the very nature of authoritarianism and how it could develop from a democratic rule. Especially in the times of Coronavirus pandemic, the world population had to face what it means to be restricted by the-powers-that-be, and even though the aforementioned restrictions were set in place for the benefit of the public, it provided us with a taste of what could have been if this authoritative

power and control was in the hands of someone more malevolent, which is exactly what is portrayed in Ling Ma's 2018 novel, *Severance*.

Ling Ma was born in Sanming, China, but grew up in Utah and Kansas, from which she went on to complete her graduate studies at Cornell University ("Ling Ma" [Bookreporter.com]); her debut novel *Severance* was critically acclaimed as it earned several awards including, but not limited to the NYPL Young Lions Fiction Award and the Kirkus Prize ("Ling Ma" [Department of English Language and Literature]). Her novel *Severance* takes the readers along through the survival story of Candace Cheng in a disease-ridden world where she is treated as a commodity through her pregnancy as a result of the authoritarian rule of the group leader Bob, who uses his influence over the other survivors to establish dominance over Candace's body.

Without a doubt, a post-apocalyptic world shaped by a sudden and unexplainable disease is not a new concept in fiction; in fact, some of the most read novels of our time, Jose Saramago's 1997 novel *Blindness* is a great example of this phenomenon. Of course, the 21st century too, has already left its mark in what we consider to be "pandemic fiction" with novels like *The Dog Stars* by Peter Heller (2012), *The Dreamers* by Karen Thompson Walker (2019), *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel (2014), and *A Beginning at the End* by Mike Chen (2020), all of which has their own take of handling the aftermath of a disease that interrupts life as we know it. *The Dog Stars*, for example, pushes the plot forward by going back and forth between the pre-apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic world, while *The Dreamers* has the world population in a dream-like trance as a result of a contagious disease – both of which are parts of the plot elements we see in *Severance*. Moreover, according to Doherty and Giordano, one of the most common and consistent elements of a pandemic fiction is the struggle for power (2), which we can clearly observe in Ling Ma's novel, as *Severance* takes the readers through the life of Candace Cheng who is a Chinese-American woman working in publishing industry to create a more fashionable Bible for teenage girls. Candace is going through the motions of life without making a meaningful decision in her life; the job she doesn't like, the hobby and talent she neglects and even her distanced boyfriend are results of her tendency to avoid making serious decisions. When a new disease called Shen Fever emerges in China and spreads across the globe, imprisoning people within their memories and routines, Candace becomes one of the few people who is immune to the fever. At this point it can be assumed that her immunity to this fever, which makes everyone follow certain patterns in their lives like mindless zombies until they die, derives from the fact that even before the pandemic Candace has been living her life by going through the same motions and routines without complaint. Moreover, as the novel goes back and forth between pre-apocalyptic and apocalyptic times, we, as readers, get to witness Candace's deeply rooted inability to take action, as she becomes possibly the last person to stay in the city of New York during the pandemic that caused the evacuation of the city, simply because she does not want to disturb the monotonous routine she has established. She continues to go to work by going through the desolate cityscape everyday, continues to take pictures of the city and share them on her blog, and continues to worry about the future of her unborn baby. But just as she runs out of options and a way to take care of herself, she is saved by a group of people led by Bob, a slightly older man who has established authority over the group through his half-kept promises and religious convictions. Through a series of events that starts with Candace's arrival to the group and ends with her imprisonment in a desolate mall in Chicago, we start to understand how Bob's previously agreed-upon leadership takes the form of an authoritarian rule where he is even able to detain a pregnant woman for an undetermined amount of time thanks to his

unquestioned authority.

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel is its prophetic nature, as some of the details of the emergence and spread of Shen Fever in the novel are incredibly similar to our real world crisis with Coronavirus, which makes it easier to compare the events in the novel to the real situation we are still dealing with. For example, like Coronavirus, the Shen Fever in *Severance* has symptoms such as “headaches, disorientation, shortness of breath, and fatigue” which are “often mistaken for the common cold, [and] patients are often unaware they have contracted Shen Fever” (Ma 15). To continue with the novel's similarities to the real events, in Ling Ma's *Severance* (published in 2018, two years before the emergence of Coronavirus), the disease is not, at first, taken seriously and even is ignored by many, causing it to spread globally even faster, similar to the way Coronavirus was met with doubt and ignorance; explaining this phenomenon, Ian Mitroff argues that “denial and obfuscation are major parts of nearly all crises” (“Corona Virus”) which explains the unreasonably underwhelming reactions of both the characters in the novel, and also general public in the real world. Moreover, another similarity between the events of the novel and our own experiences with Coronavirus is the abolishment of different aspects of daily life; this, in the novel, is seen in the disappearance of the populations with the Shen Fever, disrupting not only major industries but also social and political life. Likewise, during the pandemic, many critics argued that what we consider as the norm in our social, political and private lives is also going through a change; in support of this idea, David Chandler points out that “the virus ethically calls for the collapse of normal political and social life— that is the most striking aspect of the current crisis” (“The Coronavirus” 29). Furthermore, when we look at the novel, we understand that through this collapse rises a new sort of authoritative norm in the form of Bob, whose hunger for power and authority is made clear from the beginning. In fact, many critics like David Chandler, Panagiotis Sotiris and Daphne Halikiopoulou agree that emergence of an authoritarian regime is to be expected in times of crisis. Halikiopoulou explains that historically, many leaders in times of unrest have taken advantage of the situation at hand to gain more power and control, and the pandemic we are living through at the moment is no different, which could potentially cause long-term consequences to our understanding and experience of democracy, since in places and countries “where democratic institutions are weak, there is a serious risk of further democratic backsliding” (“The Pandemic is Exposing the Weaknesses of Populism, but Also Fuelling Authoritarianism”). Similarly, Sotiris points out that the steps China took to slow down and contain the Coronavirus pandemic were only successful because of China's ability to “implement an authoritarian version of biopolitics, which included the use of extended quarantines and bans on social activities, which was helped by the vast arsenal of coercion, surveillance and monitoring measures and technologies that the Chinese state has at its disposal” (“Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?”), which makes it clear that the authoritative regime has distinctive connections to biopolitics. In agreement with these points, David Chandler acknowledges that not only “the biological is crucial to the bounded imaginary of the state” (“Biopolitics 2.0” 1) and also at a certain point in the spread of the virus “liberal rights and freedoms [become] a threat to public security” (“The Coronavirus” 27). Moreover, all these significant points made by various critics can be found within Ling Ma's *Severance* and in the character of Bob.

At the very beginning of the novel, Bob promises the rest of the group a safe haven for them to take shelter in, by casually bringing up the shelter he purchased years ago:

I have a place for us to stay, Bob said, puffing on his e-cigarette. The scent of French

vanilla wafted through the night air.

We sat around the bonfire, listening. It was this gigantic two-story complex in Chicago that he and some high school buddies had bought.

For what? Janelle asked, blasé. Just in case the apocalypse happened?

For when the apocalypse happened, Bob corrected. We always knew it would, though I personally didn't know it would be this early. (Ma 7)

With his answer to Janelle's question, Bob is implying that he has been preparing for some sort of apocalypse for years, which helps to establish him as the leader of the group since the others start to believe him to be the most capable member of the group and begin to rely on him to make the next decision. However, their error in judgement only makes itself known after they travel from New York to Chicago and come across what Bob considers to be his shelter built for the apocalypse.

We were standing in front of Deer Oaks Mall, a beige complex with signs boasting a Macy's, a Sears, and an AMC movie theater with eight screens. This was supposed to be the Facility?

Well, it is huge. He didn't lie about that, Evan said.

All afternoon we had driven through the deserted canyons of the Chicagoland suburbs, crawling by deadened Olive Gardens, IHOPs, Kmart, the H Mart with the parking lot littered with exploded jars of kimchi. And now this. On our road trip, we had passed so many other places. Many other places would have worked. Why here? (Ma 103)

This realization that the shelter Bob has been talking and boasting about throughout their journey is nothing, but a deserted mall makes it clear to the reader that just like the historical leaders Halikiopoulou mentions, Bob has also been taking advantage of the situation to bend the will of the group to his will through his empty promises of a well-stocked and safe shelter and delusions of divine grandeur. In a way, it can be argued that he uses the lack of a central government that could help with the disaster relief to his advantage in order to establish his authority over the members of their group. Furthermore, just like Sotiris' example about the Chinese government, Bob also uses his new-found authority to “implement an authoritarian version of biopolitics” (“Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?”) that consists of imprisoning Candace against her will by using her unborn baby as an excuse; through her baby, Candace as a biological being becomes part of the imaginary of the state, as Bob sees her baby as the proof of their divine status. His religious fervor is not a new aspect of his character, as he makes is clear from his previous interactions with Candace that he believes their group was protected from Shen Fever because of a “divine selection” (Ma 22); in fact, his authority over the group is already so well-rooted that his views about their survival is easily accepted, as we can gather from these lines “[t]o Bob, it all boiled down to his religious conviction that we were chosen. That's the story to which the group officially subscribed” (Ma 23).

Aside from his divine convictions about how Candace's baby would mean hope for their small community, Bob also gives two contradictory reasons for her imprisonment: on one hand, he suggests that it would be detrimental for her to come and go as she pleases by saying that “Candace, honestly, it's for your own good that we keep you in here. It's very dangerous out there” (Ma 107), however, on the other hand, he claims that Candace is also a threat to be dealt with by accusing her of being disobedient with the words “you've shown that you had no problem breaking the rules of the group” (Ma 108). Therefore, it is clear that Bob sees Candace both as an object to be protected from harm's way and also as a threat to be

defused for the well-being of the group, which is precisely how modern governments see their population during the Coronavirus crisis according to David Chandler. Chandler argues that people are seen both as individual threats to the health of the whole population – thanks to their potential to spread the virus – and also as subjects in need of protection against others and against themselves (“The Coronavirus” 28). Moreover, even though in a non-authoritative regime “the will of the individual cannot be sacrificed without consent” (Chandler “Biopolitics 2.0” 2), under Bob's authoritarian rule, Candace's will and individuality is sacrificed for the sake of her biology, making her a part of Bob's biopolitics, as he becomes focused on the unborn baby her body is growing rather than her individual needs and rights. In this sense, as “liberal rights and freedoms [become] a threat to public security”, “the shift to a new authoritarianism” (Chandler “The Coronavirus” 27-29) makes itself more obvious in the novel through Bob's abolishment of Candace's liberal rights and freedoms.

In order to gain a more profound understanding of Bob's regime, we can take a look at the general characteristics of authoritarian regimes, as James McCarthy lists some of the most commonly seen and used tactics of authoritarian leaders.

They engage in direct and indirect assaults on the norms and institutions of democratic societies, including the rule of law, freedom of the press, and opponents' rights of speech and assembly—directly through the centralization and consolidation of power in the executive branch, efforts to test or even actively subvert resistant institutions, and punishment of political critics or opponents and indirectly through the contempt that they exhibit for norms, institutions, and people who oppose them. (McCarthy 303)

With these characteristics in mind, we can observe how Bob consciously attacks and abuses norms of democratic communities by not letting anyone else in the group have a say about his commands and by getting rid of or imprisoning his main ideological opponents who are Candace and Evan in the novel. He uses the trip Candace, Evan and Janelle took together – which ultimately caused Janelle's death – as an excuse to imprison Candace and marginalize Evan. He claims that they have broken the rules of their group by going on their own; however, it is interesting to note that both Evan and Candace have been the first ones to shy away from Bob and question his intentions; while Candace actively hides her pregnancy from him and avoids interacting with him, Evan is the first person to question the existence of the Facility that turned out to be a simple mall (Ma 70). To Bob, both acts are actions of disobedience and active resistance to his orders, which is why he makes sure that after Janelle's death, Evan is otherised and alienated to the point of committing suicide, whereas Candace's imprisonment and alienation is used as a means of silencing her voice and ensure that she has no connections to the outside world.

Overall, it can be said that Bob takes advantage of the unrest caused by the Shen Fever to establish his own authoritarian rule during which he not only creates his own religious discourse but also gets rid of his opponents through different means and tries to ensure that there are no other contesters to his leading position in the group. Including biopolitics in his rhetoric and taking control of people's liberal rights and freedoms through his – seemingly – unquestionable rule, slowly but surely, Bob builds himself an authoritarian regime in the midst of a global pandemic. While the similarities between the novel and real-life events are alarming to say the least, we can only hope that the current Coronavirus crisis

will not lead to the birth of a yet another authoritarian regime.

Works Cited

- Chandler, David. "Biopolitics 2.0: Reclaiming the Power of Life in the Anthropocene." *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 19, no. S1, 2018, pp. 14–20., doi:10.1057/s41296-018-0265-9.
- . "The Coronavirus: Biopolitics and the Rise of 'Anthropocene Authoritarianism.'" *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 26–32., doi:10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-2-26-32.
- Doherty, Jane, and James Giordano. "What We May Learn – and Need – from Pandemic Fiction." *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13010-020-00089-0>.
- Halikiopoulou, Daphne. "The Pandemic Is Exposing the Weaknesses of Populism, but Also Fuelling Authoritarianism." *LSE BREXIT*, 1 Apr. 2020, blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/04/01/covid-19-is-exposing-the-weaknesses-of-populism/.
- "Ling Ma." *Bookreporter.com*, <https://www.bookreporter.com/authors/ling-ma>.
- "Ling Ma." *Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Chicago*, <https://english.uchicago.edu/people/ling-ma>.
- Ma, Ling. *Severance*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.
- Mccarthy, James. "Authoritarianism, Populism, and the Environment: Comparative Experiences, Insights, and Perspectives." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 109, no. 2, 2019, pp. 301–313., doi:10.1080/24694452.2018.1554393.
- Mitroff, Ian I. "Corona Virus: A Prime Example of a Wicked Mess." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, vol. 157, 2020, p. 120071., doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120071.
- Sotiris, Panagiotis. "Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?" *Critical Legal Thinking*, 14 Feb. 2021, criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/14/against-agamben-is-a-democratic-biopolitics-possible/.