

Immorality and Abnormality in the Totalitarian World of Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*

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Abstract

A horrifying and poignant tale narrating the struggles of a simple family at a time when the National Alliance Party seizes and establishes powerful control on the Republic of Ireland, bringing in effect the emergency powers that null and void the Irish constitution, Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* destabilizes the concept of love and humanity, ethics and conscience. Ensuring more and more powers to the Garda Siochana, the national police and security service of Ireland, by establishing a new secret police force, the Garda National Services Bureau (GNSB), the rights and opinions of the individuals are shattered under the power of the totalitarian authority. The fight for survival of the Stack family takes one to the harrowing effect of brutality and injustice.

Keywords: dystopia, totalitarian, judiciary, emergency, teachers' union, constitution, Garda National Services Bureau (GNSB)

The dystopian novel *Prophet Song* by the Irish author Paul Lynch that grabbed the Booker Prize 2023 is a heart-rending story depicting the struggles of the Stack family at a time when the National Alliance Party seizes and establishes powerful control on the Republic of Ireland, bringing in effect the emergency powers that null and void the Irish constitution. Delegating more and more powers to the Garda Siochana, the national police and security service of Ireland, by establishing a new secret police force, the Garda National Services Bureau (GNSB), the rights and opinions of the individuals are crushed under the power of the totalitarian authority. Inspired by the Syrian Civil War that ensued refugee crisis and the indifference shown by the western world to the plight of the refugees, Paul Lynch manifests the pain of trauma and existence. Encrypted through the eyes of Eilish Stack, a mother of four, who tries to protect and support her family during the time of emergency but failing to hold on to the straw of life as uninvited darkness gradually creeps into her house unknowingly.

Blessed with a beautiful family – her husband Larry, the deputy general secretary of the Teachers' Union of Ireland and her four children Mark, Molly, Bailey and the just born Ben and also resuming her job after her maternity leave – she is happy in her own terms. Her settled life is suddenly blown off when her husband Larry is picked up by the GNSB without any justification for being a union leader with a validation that as a trade unionist 'his consequences of an action affect stability at the level of the state' – 'your behaviour looks like the conduct of someone sowing discord and unrest'. When a great destruction approaches with its violent and fierce foot it sets in with a soft tap on the door and no one realizes that it is the first soft blow of the closing catastrophic whistle. Towards the end of the novel Paul Lynch has very rightly expressed this cognitive but deplorable approach when he says –

That the end of the world is always a local event, it comes to your country and visits your town and knocks on the door of your house and becomes to others but some distant warning, a brief report on the news, an echo of events that has passed into folklore. (Prophet Song, p. 304)

Never could Eilish feel that something might go wrong in her wonderfully painted world of happiness and peace when a sudden intrusion of the GNSB creates a kind of apprehension within her but, at that time, even in her nightmare she could not imagine the final disaster – of how the world will ultimately break down into pieces and her burdened survival will become a mockery of persistence.

Initially as the catastrophe dawns upon the Stack family with the coming of the GNSB in search of Larry, Eilish is anxious and wants to know if Larry has done something wrong whereas Larry is confident that there is nothing to worry about at all as he considers it a regular intervention. It is only when Carole calls to let them know that her husband Jim has been detained and some allegation has been made against him, that Larry realizes the changing traumatic scenario. He does not know what to answer when Eilish questions ‘*Larry, how much of our constitutional rights can they suspend under these emergency powers?*’ (Prophet Song, p. 17) Then, just in a few days later, Larry’s captivity comes as a blow to the Starck family and Eilish’s confiding the information to her father show their powerlessness, helplessness and hopelessness in this vulnerable situation –

She looks up and says, Larry is having some trouble in the union, the government doesn’t want the TUI to go on strike, they took him in, Dad, and more or less threatened him, can you believe that? (Prophet Song, p. 19)

The situation gradually worsens – Larry is not just imprisoned, he is projected as a security risk, the unions bow and remain silent, the country starts casting the teachers as villains, judiciary is lost as habeas corpus has been suspended under the national emergency legislation giving state the special powers and silencing the judiciary and the ultimatum to Eilish that if they continue to petition for a directive, they will be arrested and detained too. Things go out of control, and they quite confused about how to react – Carole feels guilty that after her husband’s arrest many people have fallen silent and Eilish senses that this is not a time to speak but a time to keep silent as everyone has become afraid after their husbands have been taken from them and positioned into an uncanny quietness.

Before Eilish could admit and adjust herself to this unaccountable loss, she is endeared into another setback – that her eldest son, Mark, though only seventeen, has been selected from the school for national service by the army. Eilish is shaken and tries to figure out possibilities of how to save her son from the clutches of horror but Mark knows there is no way, as there was known when their father was taken into captivity – the letter that has been issued against his name has sealed his destiny. Eilish wants to do her maximum to give him some solace and peace, wishes to hold his hand and tell him that everything will be fine, but the disturbing and lost look on the face of her son demands her submission to the situation. Molly, Eilish’s fourteen-year-old daughter, does not realise the significance of silence and the sacrifice in compliance. Her emotional outburst to get her dad back encourages her to protest against the existing system which makes Eilish’s blood run cold. She tries to make her

young daughter understand the outcome of such provocative outburst, making her realize that if she does something they don't like, her name and address might be listed, or they can just come and put her in a car and take her away as they have done for so many. Her anguish and frustration burst out as she endorses the horrific situation

And where's that car going to, Molly, have a think about that, maybe it's going to where all the other cars go, the unmarked cars that pull up silently and lift people off the street because of one thing or another, the people who do not return home again, you think because you're fourteen years old you can do what you like, that the state isn't interested in you, but they arrested those boys and those boys haven't yet been released and they're your age, you think I'm not doing anything, that I'm just standing about waiting for your father to return, but what I am doing is keeping this family together because right now that is the hardest thing to do in a world that seems designed on tearing us apart, sometimes not doing something is the best way to get what you want, sometimes you have to be quiet and keep your head down, sometimes when you get up in the morning you should spend more time choosing your colours. (Prophet Song, p. 76-77)

The gruesome and uncanny situation is very well reflected from the fear and silence of Eilish as she restricts and directs her daughter to unimportant things at an unusual time. The nervousness of nothingness haunts her all the time and when in the company of her ageing father, Simon, she tries to look back and hold on to the past that will never come back. The loveable past looks so distant as she searches as she searches and craves for more. As brutality and murder increase with more and more children taken into custody and then beheaded or killed and then the body returned to the parents, Eilish can bear no more. The lady who thought silence can be the best option decides to be a part of the revolt – dread dissolves in extreme situation. They gather in thousands demanding an end to Emergency Powers and the immediate release of all political prisoners. The situation keeps worsening – the more of revolt, the more of punishment.

Eilish realizes that the only option to save Mark is to send him out of the country, to some boarding school across the border. On the day of Mark's birthday she discloses this secret mission to her family – it's difficult for the family to accept but Eilish knows there is no other option. It is decided to hide Mark at Carole's basement room, like a criminal, and he can move in and out only when it's dark – all this adjustment till something is done to send him out of the country. Mark hates this situation as he is not allowed to use his regular mobile phone, not allowed to meet his girlfriend Samantha and stay in a dark and dingy place when his father's detention requires his revolt. When Samantha calls on Eilish to know the whereabouts of Mark, Eilish lies both to Mark and Samantha; she knows she has drawn the blade on her son but it's only to save him. On the other side, because Mark is not handed over to the army, his name is listed in the newspaper for all those people who absconded from the military service. In shock Eilish reads her son's name again and again, understands how they have damned her son and how easy it was for everyone to see her son's desertion in the form of an advertisement.

Mark feels stuck in the room which he considers as a prison and he opens up to Eilish about how guilty he feels with this charge of cowardice and falsehood. At a time when he should be fighting for the release of his dad whom he misses so much, he is confined to this room when he should have joined the rebel army. Mark's exposure on the list of fleeing demotes Eilish's situation in office, destabilizing her professional and personal life completely. Her father advises her to leave the country with her children; he knows that Larry will never come back, Mark is bound to go and in this economic imbalance her job makes no sense. Simon asks Eilish not to worry about him and assures her that he will be fine on his own as no one will trouble an old man, but they should leave before the borders are tightened.

The unwanted astonishing event happens – Mark escapes from Carole's place, the secured place Eilish had placed him into. When ultimately Mark contacts them, he expresses his displeasure and although Eilish requests him to come back, he is adamant on his decision –

I can't sit by any longer, Mark says, the whole thing is making me sick, it is making Molly sick, I want to have my old life back, I want to have Dad back in the house, the way we used to live. (Prophet Song, p. 135)

Eilish's words fail to justify her agony and dread, she gradually sinks into the grip of darkness and despair. Her house is attacked, the hooligans paint 'TRAITOR' with red on their car – Eilish knows she will be judged within the community, they had watched what had happened the last night, but they will not open their mouth for sure. The stress at home increases too with Bailey reacting to Eilish's reasonings; Eilish slapping him and then enfolding him in her arms and his moving out of her embrace and going out of the house though Eilish cautions him that it is nearing curfew time. When Samantha is invited home by Molly without the knowledge of Eilish and looking into Samantha's eyes Eilish knows that she knows the whereabouts of her son Mark, Eilish understands that things are falling apart and she has neither the courage nor the strength to fight for any right.

Eilish has not listened to her father – she continues to stay there with the hope that one day her husband and son will come back, and their lives will be as it was earlier. That optimism is her only source of survival. She couldn't take in the fact when Carole says that their husbands will never come back as they will never be returned and this truth is known by all including the dogs and so she wants to fight the state. Eilish tries to shield when Carole brings out a coloured image of her husband Jim Sexton with the words 'ABDUCTED AND MURDERED BY THE STATE'. Eilish is aware that this might lead to more of trouble and at the same time she does not want to lose the hope of her husband's survival. She becomes austere against Carole and tells her not to spread such unauthentic rumours picked up on the streets; she emphasizes that nobody knows the truth as there is a total absence of facts and though they are in despair, everything is doubtful and where there is doubt there is hope.

War takes its full swing and finally after a few days when it relapses for some time, Eilish hurries to meet her father – she has to manage between her children and her father. War intensifies and in shelling they lose a part of their house – Eilish holding on to her three children, trying to protect the little bit of life they possess. Unaccountable horror reign every moment and they hold on to the last straw, not

letting themselves to resign. When finally the war comes to a temporary halt, she rushes to check on her father only to find that he has disappeared. It is only later, when she is trying to get hold of a few essential things for the house with the realization that she is running short of money and she might have to beg from her sister, that she comes to know from Aine, that their dad is safe.

Then another blow strikes her, and her heart is ripped off when Bailey's is hurt. There is so much of chaos everywhere – people killed and wounded, hospitals with overloaded patients running out of their stocks, massive queues in the availability of beds, commotion and crisis all over. She admits Bailey in a hospital and is forced to leave them in their custody as she has to get back home to bring their identity cards. When she comes back the next day Bailey is shifted, and no one gives her the actual location. Traumatized, she moves from one hospital to the other. She stands before madness, seeing her son swallowed by the regime – day after day she returns to the hospital pleading and begging for her son, trying to make them understand that he is just a thirteen year old kid but there is no one to listen to her cry. It seems the world is going through a stony sleep, sans empathy, sans expectation, sans emotion.

Making herself believe that it is not the correct place she should be, Eilish enters the morgue at the recommendation of a cleaner. She consoles herself by re-establishing the fact within her that they cannot do anything wrong to just a thirteen year old kid. With a prayer in her lips, feeling the presence of her husband Larry by her side, Eilish unzips the zipper bags one by one she stares at each face of the dead body and whispers that it was not her son. But destiny does not allow her a long time to escape pain as she bends and sees the broken face of Bailey. The dark and deep agony of a mother holding the tortured body of her young child has been agonisingly expressed by Paul Lynch, and reading through the lines create the sensation of the failure and loss of humanity –

Seeing before her the face of Bailey serenely broken, the skin smelling of bleach, and what was bent inside her breaks so that a wretched howl escapes her body and she takes his face into her hands, stares into the face of the dead child seeing only the living child, and she wishes she could die instead, smoothing her hand along the downy face, the hair still wet with blood. She whispers, my beautiful child, what have they done to you? The skin before her clouded with bruising, the missing and broken teeth, she unzips the bag down seeing the nails torn from his hands and feet, seeing the bore of a drill through the front of his knee, the cigarette burns along the torso, and she takes his hand and kisses it. (Prophet Song, p. 272)

Has civilization lost its sanity? The murder of a child for no reason at all, dehumanizing him to a number and then providing an incorrect report of his dying due to heart failure – are we really humans? Is not the world ashamed of the irrationality where existence itself is the major crisis?

And finally, Eilish decides to escape – escape to that unfamiliar world – with the remains of her family and a hope that maybe this unknown place will give them some shelter and protection. With Molly and Ben, she departs on this mysterious journey knowing that the acquainted world she was so accustomed with has not just given her nothing but had snatched away all that she had. Molly is not willing to part but Eilish

knows that it is the only option. At this juncture Eilish realizes that the end of the world is a very local event; it first comes to your country and then your town and then knocks at your door; you become the news and then it is just an echo of events and then it passes off to become a folklore. So, although we say that the world will come to an end in our lifetime it is actually a fantasy – the world moves on, we become non-existent. Generations go on, with the same theory and the same song, human beings keep changing and that is how the world evolves –

Seeing that out of terror comes pity and out of pity comes love and out of love the world can be redeemed again, and she can see that the world does not end, that it is vanity to think the world will end during your lifetime in some sudden event, that what ends is your life and only your life, that what is sung by the prophets is but the same song sung across time. (Prophet Song, p. 272)

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