

Machiavellianism in Michael Dobbs's *House of Cards***Keywords: Machiavellianism, power, *House of Cards*****Amer Ali Hussein****Prof. Luma Ibrahim Shakir (Ph.D.)****University of Diyala/College of Education for Humanities****kmtb2007@gmail.com****lumahh50@gmail.com****Abstract**

Machiavellianism is an egotistic human demeanor. Its essence is expediency, opportunism, and reaching specific goals by various means and tricks, regardless of its righteousness or appropriateness to the prevailing societal and ethical norms and traditions. The maxim of this conduct is the end justifies the means. As a term, Machiavellianism is associated with the name of the 16th-century Italian thinker Niccolò Machiavelli and his debatable treatise *The Prince*. This research tackles the theme of Machiavellianism in one of Michael Dobbs's most celebrated novels, which is *House of Cards* (1989). *House of Cards* exemplifies a pragmatic appliance of Machiavelli's doctrine. The author genuinely portrays the blind pursuit and thirst for power by politicians and offers the reader a character that represents the zenith of contemporary Machiavellianism.

1. Introduction

Man today lives in a hectic quest for power and domination. Since the evolution of societies, he has been preoccupied with how to maximize his control and gain predominance over his rivals and foes. The method by which power is realized and sustained has not changed. Today's princes walk upon the same paths as the princes of the past. The "effectual truth" of politics as a Machiavellian school of thought, takes a step back to *The Prince* (1513), a handbook for rulers that sets realistic values in political theories. Machiavelli's theory, which depicts the nature of the ruler who holds power, is based on extrapolation of many historical paradigms of governance and concludes that the exercise and sustainability of power can only take place through certain means, for example, cunning, deception, duplicity, manipulation, cruelty, selfishness, and the primacy of self-interest.

Many philosophers and scholars try to comprehend the essence of the concept of power. In this context, several attempts are made to define it. Bertrand Russell identifies power as "the production of intended effects" (Singh 57) whereas Hannah Arendt defines it as "the human aptitude not only to act but to act in concert. It is not an individual property; it belongs to a group and keeps on belonging to it as long as this group is not set in variance" (Arendt, Qtd in Sanghare 1). The French philosopher Michel Foucault opines that there are different forms of power relations. They can be in play, work, family relationships, as well as inside an institution or a government (Sanghare 1).

According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Machiavelli was the first to consider the problem and nature of power within the state and away from the church authority. In Machiavelli's view, politics is the practice of the possible, not the ideal. The goal of politics is primarily the acquisition, survival, and continuation of power. It is the means and mechanisms used to maintain hegemony and control. Consequently, any Machiavellian behavior implies a dangerous possibility that the forbidden becomes permissible. The cruelty and brutality of rulers become strategic goals and the practice of bloody and immoral acts develops into a permissible and useful means to reach the helm of the ruling (Nederman).

To conclude, power is a neutral instrument that can be used for good or evil. It embodies the capacity of a man to get matters done by other people. Many scholars perceive power as something evil though this concept has several positive connotations. Oftentimes, power has been considered synonymous with oppression, compulsion, and tyranny, despite the truth that such negative considerations are a single facet of power. In this vein, there is nothing ethically undue when a human seeks to maximize his power as long as he respects the rights of others and obeys the laws. Nonetheless, massive power results in an immense responsibility.

The present research paper tackles the issue of Machiavellianism as it exemplifies a serious deviation by individuals, institutions, and governments from all accepted ethical and societal values. It casts a light on this realistic behavioral dilemma, which associated with the name of the Italian thinker Niccolò Machiavelli. Through its four sections, it attempts to sense the risk of Machiavellianism that is based on vicious means instead of honest competition. The first section is an introduction in which the researcher endeavors to give an apparent definition for the concept of Power since Machiavelli's doctrine is built on the belief that the main goal of politics is the acquisition, endurance, and persistence of power. The second section attempts to define and trace the development of Machiavellianism as a term and as a way of conduct common in different domains of life. The three remaining sections form the main discussion of this research and its conclusion. Through the analysis of the main themes, symbols, and characterization of Michael Dobbs's novel *House of Cards* (1989), the researcher tries to highlight the Machiavellian conducts wherever to exist. Finally, in the conclusion, the researcher sums up the main points resulted from the study.

2. Machiavellianism: Background, Definition, and Etymology.

The subject of Machiavellianism has been the focus of researchers in various fields of life. Most previous studies on Machiavellianism were in the field of psychology. Some researchers have addressed the topic of Machiavellian behavior in different environments such as working areas and

academic studies; however, the researcher noticed a remarkable shortage in researches that tackle Machiavellianism within the scope of Literature, particularly in fiction. Recently, Machiavellian behavior has extremely spread among different slices of society and in various fields. It has not restricted to politicians, governments, organizations or institutions rather it has reached even the most intimate personal relationships. Today, Machiavellianism exists among people as well as rulers. It undermines values and raises suspicion and fear among people then consequently leads to the weakening of social relations and lack of involvement.

The maxim of "the end justifies the means", which represents the nucleus of Machiavellianism, has pulled the world into the most dreadful crimes committed against humanity, for example, the criminal actions of Nazism, fascism, and all totalitarian regimes. Machiavellianism did not exclude even countries that claim democracy as they exploited their power and influence to subjugate people to their own interests. The crimes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are still present in the memory of the modern world.

Machiavellianism is a human behavior characterizes by deception, craftiness, and political duplicity. As a term, it expresses a philosophical or political ideology that can be summed up in the maxim "the ends justify the means", the most famous principle used by princes and leaders to guard their thrones. Machiavellianism refers to character merit which leads people to focus on their interests and to exploit, deceive, and manipulate others to reach certain ends.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Machiavellianism is "the employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or general conduct." This dictionary gives various synonyms for the word "Machiavellian" for example, devious, cunning, crafty, artful, scheming, designing, conniving, opportunistic, insidious, treacherous, perfidious, two-faced, tricky, double-dealing, unscrupulous, and deceitful. In modern psychological terminology, Machiavellianism indicates a duplicitous interpersonal style combined with a pragmatic and egotistical moral frame.

During the sixteenth century, the concept of Machiavellianism became a common word to designate those who used crafty means to acquire more power. Yet, this term did not get a psychological connotation until the 1970s, when two social psychologists Richard Christie and Florence L. Geis developed the "Machiavellianism Scale", a tool still used to assess the degree of Machiavellianism personality has. This scale called the "Mach-IV test" (Christie and Geis 16). Christie and Geis in their renowned study, *Studies in Machiavellianism* (1970) concluded:

High Machs manipulate more, win more, are persuaded less, persuade others more, and otherwise differ significantly from low Machs as predicted in situations in which subjects interact face to face with others, when the situation provides

latitude for improvisation and the subject must initiate responses as he can or will, and in situations in which affective involvement with details irrelevant to winning distracts low Machs (312).

Together with Narcissism and Psychopathy, Machiavellianism constitutes a part of the so-called “Dark Triad” of character. This term is first coined in 2002 by Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams in their article “The Dark Triad of Personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy” to refer to these three remarkably negative traits, however, each one of them has a different focus (Paulhus & Williams). R. G. Vleeming in his article “Machiavellianism: A Preliminary Review” wrote:

Machiavellianism denotes the personality dimension on which people can be ordered in terms of a more or less manipulative way of behavior in different interpersonal situations. Behavior on this dimension ranges from a cool detachment, i.e., the high Machiavellian, to high involvement with people, i.e., the low Machiavellian (Vleeming 295).

In sum, Machiavellianism is an intrinsic human behavior rooted in souls. Its holders are characterized by numerous attributes including selfishness, self-centeredness, deception, callousness, cunning, evil, and the ability to exploit others and manipulate them. The essence of this behavior is expediency, opportunism, and to reach specific ends by various means, no matter whether they are ethical or morally wrong. Machiavellianism exists among people as well as rulers. It is not restricted to any time or place. It can be found in men, women, and even children.

3. House of Cards: Background and Influence

House of Cards is a political thriller novel written in 1989 by Michael Dobbs, a member of the British House of Lords and a former Chief of Staff at Conservative Party headquarter. The novel is based on the background of a political power conflict. It was Dobbs’s first novel and because of its success, he wrote two sequels: *To Play the King* in 1992 and *The Final Cut* in 1994. In 2013, he rewrote it and made some modifications. The novel was set at the end of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Based around the life and never-ending desires of the Machiavellian politician Francis Urquhart, it was adapted into an immensely applauded television series. In 1990, the BBC in four parts televised it in a critically and popularly acclaimed television drama series. Presently, the renowned U.S. television adaptation on Netflix has won several awards like Emmys and Golden Globes.

House of Cards reveals an anecdote of the Machiavellian villain Francis Ewan Urquhart who wants to become Prime Minister by any means. The narrative of the novel unfolds with Mattie Storin, a youthful political journalist trying to achieve success and fame in a masculine world of journalism (*House of Cards* 7). Neither Mattie Storin nor Francis Urquhart is the narrator of the story.

The novel has a third-person omniscient narrator who tells the entire story. It is divided into several sections “whose titles correspond to the time period they represent, from Thursday 10th June to Tuesday 30th November the same year, thus the whole story lasts little less than half a year” (Jergová 22).

The title of the novel encloses a great deal of symbolism and gives an indication of the nature of politics as a risky game involving winning, losing, and sacrificing. There is a possibility of a correlation between *House of Cards* and the House of Commons - the main chamber where all-important legislations in the UK are issued. This idiom signifies something that can easily be broken or collapse by itself. It indicates something very fragile, insecure, and incoherent in nature that cannot be protected. Eventually, the title *House of Cards* suggests that all politicians' positions are prone to collapse since they are very insecure and in a frail balance.

House of Cards finds its source of inspiration within Shakespeare's plays like *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth*. The character of Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello* is quite paralleled to Dobbs's protagonist Urquhart. Both of them exhibit an over-ambition for power and they do not hesitate to commit crimes to achieve this end. Urquhart feels betrayed by Collingridge the Prime Minister who refuses the ministry reshuffle. After the end of the elections, Urquhart recommends Collingridge to make a comprehensive reshuffle to his ministry so as to retrieve his supporters' confidence. Yet, Collingridge declines such drastic change. He is afraid that the public might interpret the reshuffle as an indication of weakness; therefore, he decides to retain the current MPs entirely. Urquhart, who has no other option, pretends to accept the decision of the Prime Minister hiding his deep discontent and frustration (Mortier 3).

Urquhart repeatedly uses deception, coercion, and manipulation to remove his opponents and pave the way for the premiership. As a Chief Whip of the Conservative party, he is accountable for the party's parliamentary group and ensures that all of the MPs are present during voting. He works secretly behind the scenes to collect all “little secrets and peculiarities (adultery, conspiracies, addictions, etc.) of all the members of parliament. This information makes him somewhat dominant over his colleagues and he does not hesitate to use this power for his own gains” (Mortier 3). Such secrets and peculiarities are a source of a remarkable strength for Urquhart that enables him to blackmail party members whenever he wants without their knowledge.

The first victim of Urquhart's snares is the Publicity Director Roger O'Neill. In the first part of the novel, O'Neill is covertly addicted to cocaine and used to charge extra sums of money for the budget of office to cover his high expenses. This thing makes him paranoid and becomes an ideal target for Urquhart's Machiavellian plans. O'Neill begins to do all the dirty works for him including disclose “compromising information about Collingridge (the

cancellation of the hospital renovations, a budget cut in the army's finances, etc.), organise off-the-books meetings between his secretary and certain politicians in order to have a way of pressuring them" (Part 1). Through the character of the Chief Whip, Dobbs introduces the reader into the real world of politics, a world with few virtues and many vices.

4- Machiavellianism in *House of Cards*

In order to trace Machiavellianism in the novel, *House of Cards* must be seen through the lens of *The Prince*. Machiavelli's pragmatism is based on the effectual truth of the brutal nature of the human psyche and its struggle over material interests. Hence, Machiavellian characters like Urquhart, who always in search of power, have various qualities that enable them to reach their goals. They are self-centered, fickle, deceptive, greedy, and do not fulfill any covenant. They cling to material interests more than their own lives and are ready to change their whims and emotions. *House of Cards* embraces sufficient gestures to designate that Francis Urquhart is influenced by Machiavelli's thoughts and the reader can easily regard him as a disciple if not present re-embodiment of an ideal prince.

Francis Urquhart represents a familiar mixture in political life: Machiavellian, opportunistic, intelligent, egotistic, and exceptional ability to get out of the crisis. His ambitions met with his wife's aspirations in their unique and complex relationship to reach the prime ministry using all legitimate and illegitimate means. Urquhart managed to eradicate his opponents in leadership competition by unethical means like defaming and fabricating scandals against them. He adapted one of the well-known Machiavellian maxims, which is fear. In chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli states, "From this, a dispute arises whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two" (*The Prince* Ch. 17). Dobbs totally agrees with Machiavelli's notion of fear and love. In his preface to part one of *House of Cards*, he elucidates, "It's not respect but fear that motivates a man; ... When a man is afraid you will crush him, utterly destroy him, his respect will always follow" (*House of Cards* Part. 1).

Consequently, Urquhart on many occasions in the novel employs a mixture of manipulation, fear, and cruelty to subjugate his rivals and move them away from the premiership. These include threatening to publish photographs about Education Secretary Harold Earle's homosexual affairs, leading Health Secretary Peter MacKenzie to hit a handicapped man, and blackmailing Foreign Secretary Patrick Woolton compelling him to withdraw. Through all these incidents, Urquhart did all these injuries strictly in a way that he did not fear any vengeance in return. He obeyed the teachings of Machiavelli specifically the one

that says, “Men should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones; so the offense one does to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it” (*The Prince* Ch. 3).

Besides having his own charisma, Urquhart exploited the media to create a public image characterized by asceticism in political positions and not to run after power. He maintains an external insight of acceptance among others that is difficult to break in. As *House of Cards* progresses, Urquhart's political action turning to stick to one of the fundamental principles of Machiavelli's doctrine, specifically, the desire to be feared, rather than loved. *The Prince* upholds fear as an efficient means of control. Machiavelli adheres to unite both fear and love in a single ruler, however, this would be tough to accomplish since fear and love are intrinsically paradoxical.

Depending on the above, the reader can assume that the novel deals with a fearless, witty, well educated, and a Machiavellian man who insists to climb the political ladder at any cost. He is an over-ambitious cruel character who will do anything in order to achieve his goals. He is acquainted with all Machiavelli's advice on obtaining power and maintaining it by any means however immoral or cruel. He even wrote a book about Machiavelli and his teachings. He believes that in politics, “Nothing lasts, not forever. Not laughter, not lust, not even life itself... Which is why we make the most of what we have” (*House of Cards* Part 1).

The Machiavellian behavior in the novel is not limited to the character of the hero. Most of the novel's figures, in a way or another, used Machiavellian means to reach their ends, for example, the ambitious journalist Mattie Storin. Mattie, at the age of twenty-eight, is the youngest employee among the political department staff of *The Chronicle Newspapers*. She is trying to achieve success and fame in an exclusive masculine world of journalism. Mattie is an aggressive character both professionally and sexually, however, she has principles and refuses to hide the truth. She is a bachelor who has “nothing tying her down, and dreams of being the best political journalist in England” (Mortier 10).

In addition, Mattie is a stubborn reporter who has an aptitude to discover the real stories hidden behind the apparent events. She managed to find out scandalous plots and corruption at the top levels of the authority and determined to expose it albeit she has to risk everything including her life. In order to achieve her ambitions to be a celebrated journalist, Mattie follows the Machiavellian maxim of the ends justify the means. Yet these means are not all decent and ethical. For instance, she has illegal affairs with lots of men including her colleague John Krajewski and the Chief Whip Francis Urquhart. In the first part of the novel, Dobbs explains:

Mattie Storin very much wanted to succeed as a journalist and to develop the skills which she knew she possessed. But she was also a woman, a very attractive one, and was determined not to sacrifice her identity simply to conform to the typecasting expected of young women working their way up in journalism. She saw no reason why she should attempt either to grow a beard in order to have her talent recognised, or to play the simpering lovely lady to satisfy the chauvinistic demands of her male colleagues, particularly so inadequate an example as Preston (*House of Cards* Part 1).

In spite of her promiscuity, Mattie has real feelings of love towards Urquhart. Her attraction to an old man like him is a result of an Oedipus complex she suffers from (Sanghare 37). Being a lonely and single woman who keeps resisting in an intense misogynistic world of journalism, Mattie is obliged to seek an emotional support from Urquhart. She finds with him compensation for the paternal affection that she lacks. Sanghare explains some aspects of Mattie's psychological issue:

The Oedipus complex disappears with age, but it does not with regards to Mattie. Because she cannot sleep with her father, she transfers her lust to Urquhart. The latter is her father's age; she confesses to him 'My father was a strong character. Clear eyes, clear mind. In some ways you remind me of him' Aware of her complex, Urquhart uses it against her and manages to maintain his control over her (Sanghare 37).

The relation between Urquhart and Mattie is a utilitarian one. Both of them have goals and now they are in need of suitable means to achieve them. Mattie exploits Urquhart through sex to get the information she needs. Yet, Urquhart discloses this information to her deliberately to distort the public image of the Prime Minister and consequently diminish his popularity. Likewise, Urquhart's control over Mattie is based on a sexual relationship. He followed an advice from his wife who recommended him to sleep with Mattie to better control her (Sanghare 37).

Urquhart's ploy is to leak sensitive information to the media through Mattie who works for *The Chronicle*, a journal is owned by Benjamin Landless who shares Urquhart the same feelings of hatred towards the Prime Minister Collingridge. Though this information is false and fabricated, Collingridge is compelled to resign and Urquhart's road to the Prime Minister's position is a less bumpy now.

All of the characters mentioned above have roles in a Machiavellian web that has been woven by Urquhart. In the actions of all men, especially those who have power, people judge by the results. No one looks to the means however they are wicked, savage, and morally wrong. Whatever Urquhart did, his story remains a dark tale of greediness, corruption, and ambition that cannot be curbed. Whether he acts as a villain in a righteous system, or whether that system is ethically distorted does not exempt the government from encouraging Machiavellianism and utilitarianism, which undermine the democratic principles that justify its existence.

Conclusion

Machiavelli's political beliefs are problematic since they abolish noble virtues in favor of opportunistic self-interests. Tirelessly, the Machiavellian leader conspires to maintain power and superiority instead of fostering supreme principles. Such Machiavellian demeanor is innate in the majority of people nowadays particularly politicians. It roots deep in their souls. The Machiavellian character characterized by numerous attributes including self-centeredness, deception, callousness, cunning, evil, and the ability to exploit and direct others to do things that he considers them as his rights. The essence of this behavior is expediency and to reach specific ends by various means whether they are moral or satanic.

This research paper, via its four sections, attempted to sense the danger of Machiavellianism that is based on malformed methods to gain power far from all accepted celestial and societal values. It has tackled the issue of Machiavellianism by selecting one of Michael Dobbs's celebrated novels, which is *House of Cards*. Through the lens of Machiavelli's notorious book, *The Prince*, the researcher has traced the Machiavellian conduct of the characters of this novel. Concurrently, the study highlighted Machiavellianism through thematic analysis, characterization, and accentuating some of the symbolic elements in the novel.

House of Cards is a practical implementation of Machiavelli's teachings. Michael Dobbs genuinely portrays the Machiavellian behaviors of politicians stripping their blind pursuit, thirst for power, and offered the reader a character that represents the peak of contemporary Machiavellianism. Francis Urquhart's prudent calculations led him to climb fast the ladder of power. His political behavior demonstrated fundamental principles of Machiavelli's doctrine specifically, the desire to be feared rather than loved and the motto of the end justifies the means. Urquhart's ultimate lack of ethics made him not refrain from even murdering in an endeavor to maximize his control and maintain an external insight of acceptance among others that is difficult to break in.

الميكافيلية في رواية مايكل دوبس (بيت البطاقات)

الكلمات المفتاحية: الميكافيلية، السلطة، بيت البطاقات.

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المخلص

الميكافيلية هي سلوك إنساني اناني جوهرها النفعية والانتهازية والتوصل إلى أهداف محددة بوسائل وحيل مختلفة بغض النظر عن استقامتها أو ملائمتها للأعراف والتقاليد المجتمعية والأخلاقية السائدة. إن المبدأ الرئيس لهذا السلوك هو "الغاية تبرر الوسيلة". كمصطلح ارتبطت الميكافيلية باسم المفكر الإيطالي في القرن السادس عشر نيكولو ميكافيلي وأطروحته المثيرة للجدل "الأمير". تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية موضوع الميكافيلية في واحدة من روايات مايكل دوبس الأكثر شهرة وهي (بيت البطاقات) والتي نشرت عام ١٩٨٩. تمثل رواية (بيت البطاقات) تطبيقاً عملياً لتعاليم ميكافيلي يصور الكاتب فيها بصدق السعي الأعمى والتعطش إلى السلطة من قبل السياسيين مقدما للقراء شخصية تمثل ذروة الميكافيلية المعاصرة.

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