

ASPECTS OF TOTALITARIANISM IN GEORGE ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* (1948) AND THEIR RE- EMERGENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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Abstract

Published in 1948, George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty –Four conjures up the nightmarish vision of a totalitarian regime in the fictional Oceania in 1984. This powerful government uses a number of tactics like psychological manipulation, physical control and technological mechanism to keep an eye on every facet of human life to the extent that the very existence of human beings has been virtually wiped out. It is from the viewpoint of the main character Winston that one witnesses the brutal physical and psychological cruelties inflicted on the people by their government. The language of the novel exemplifies so distinctly the prospective distortion of the English language by the totalitarian leadership. In my article I have dealt with the psychological, physical and technological aspects of totalitarianism in the novel. I have also gone through the increasing incidences of the totalitarian propensities in the present – day world which Orwell has foreseen in the novel.

One of the most powerful dystopian novels ever written, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty – Four* (1948), has an abiding quality. The book tells the story of its protagonist, Winston Smith, and his ineffectual struggle to revolt against the totalitarian control and imposed suppression that are characteristic features of his government.

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English explains the term *totalitarian* as “a political system in which those in power have complete control and do not allow people freely to oppose them.” First theoretically developed in the 1920s by Italian fascists, chiefly Giovanni Amendola, totalitarianism has been present in a large number of organizations throughout history. The strategies that are essential to the historical formation and practice of totalitarian governments such as absence of private life, single party radical nationalism, the party's totalitarian glorification of the leader, prevalence of the collective will of the party,

the use of terror and technological control, the role of propaganda in dealing with the non – totalitarian world, secret police forces, suppression of sexual instincts etc. are brought out significantly in the novel by Orwell.

Nineteen Eighty –Four describes vividly the frightening scene of a world divided into three operationally similar totalitarian super states – Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia – that are taken part in frequent conflicts with one another. Taking Oceania as the utmost example of a totalitarian state, the novel unfolds in Airstrip One, the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania.

The novel is divided into three parts and an Appendix. In the first part Orwell presents how the totalitarian society of Oceania functions, through the point of view of Winston. The second part deals with Winston’s prohibited clandestine relationship with Julia and his keenness to rebel against the party; and the third part discusses Winston’s imprisonment and infliction of severe bodily pain on him by the party. The book ends with an Appendix on the development and structure of “Newspeak,” the official language of Oceania. In creating Newspeak, Orwell was influenced both by the persuasive language of politics that takes the place of genuine communication and advertising vocabulary that makes unreasonable and uncertain promises.

The political system that prevails in Oceania is called *Ingsoc* in *Newspeak*. It is the abbreviated form of an (improper) English socialism. Orwell has described in detail the principles and hierarchical structure of this system. At the summit of the pyramid stands the Big Brother, the possibly mythical ruler of Oceania. Gigantic photographs of him supervise every public space with the warning “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” (Orwell, 9). He is the omnipresent revelation of the party’s drive for power for its own sake. Below him comes the Inner Party, the elite ruling minority, who makes up two percent of the population. The members of the Inner Party enjoy great wealth. Next to the Inner Party is the Outer Party that constitutes thirteen percent of the population. The Outer Party does not wield any real power and their exploitation is essential for the smooth running of the system. At the bottom of the pyramid, there are the “Proles” or the masses, comprising eighty five percent of the population. In the novel, Winston Smith, as the voice of Orwell, constantly emphasizes that the only hope for change lies with the Proles. They are much like the lower classes in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* except that the Proles’ foolishness is not hereditary and is latently redemptive. Having no “brains,” the Proles are free from being brainwashed. This organized body of the Party is maintained by the Inner Party through terror, propaganda, war and denial of basic human needs.

The three slogans of the Party are seemingly absurd because they represent a grotesque misrepresentation of standard values. According to these slogans, war is to be regarded as peace, freedom is to be considered as slavery, and ignorance is to be cherished as strength. The entire apparatus of the government is divided among four Ministries the names of which

also contradict their functions: the Ministry of Truth (Minitrue) conducts propaganda and historical revisionism; the Ministry of Love (Miniluv) is the centre of the Inner Party's repulsive activities; the Ministry of Peace (Minipax) wages war; and the Ministry of Plenty (Miniplenty) oversees an economy of permanent shortages. In Oceania "...the distinction between true and false in their usual meaning has disappeared. This is the great cognitive triumph of totalitarianism: it cannot be accused of lying any longer since it has succeeded in abrogating the very idea of truth" (Kolakowski 127).

Winston Smith, the main character of the novel, works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, as a propaganda officer, altering historical records to match the Party's official version of past events. There is supposed to be a mutinous underground organization, called the Brotherhood, dedicated to the destruction of the party and the government. This movement is led by a Jew, Emmanuel Goldstein who, however, is a mere fictitious leader, fabricated by the Party. O'Brien, a powerful member of the Inner Party, tricks Winston into believing that he is a member of the Brotherhood. "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism" is a revolutionary pamphlet on the secret history of Oceania, allegedly written by Emmanuel Goldstein. O'Brien claims to have worked together with Goldstein in writing this book. This book is in fact a party creation.

There is a daily programme called the "Two Minutes Hate" which aims at educating the people against the doctrines and theories of Goldstein, who is regarded by the government and the Party as the "Enemy of the People." Likewise, a "Hate Week" is observed every year with the same object of bringing the Brotherhood and its leader into bad reputation and stirring a wave of indignant feelings and ill - will against them. It reaches its climax in publicly carrying out the death sentence of thousands of war criminals. The state has carefully invented rites such as public hangings of prisoners and the "Two Minutes Hate" to create admiration for offensive nationalism and aggressive patriotism.

The government keeps the citizens of Oceania, particularly the Outer Party members, under constant surveillance through a secret militia called the Thought Police ("Thinkpol"). They are Big Brother's agents who get rid of potential rebels. Every apartment is equipped with a telescreen, a kind of two - way television, through which the Thought Police monitor the slightest movements, the most ordinary actions and even the thought processes of the people. The telescreens are like the public eyes in Alasdair Gray's *A History Maker*. There is hardly any place which is beyond the focus of the telescreen. Even in the countryside there are hidden microphones fitted in various places in order to catch unthinking conversations which directly reach the Thought Police. People have no real privacy. There is also the police patrol in helicopters that fly close to the roofs of the buildings and look inquisitively through people's windows. The different levels of significance of both the police patrol and the Thought Police are expressed in Winston's words: "The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered" (Orwell 10).

The Thought Police employ surreptitious agents, who pose as normal citizens and report any person with subversive tendencies. After years of surveillance, the detected offenders are taken to the Ministry of Love with the gruesome Room 101 where they are done away with, completely destroyed or wiped out. Mr. Charrington, the antique dealer and O'Brien, a double agent to Big Brother are such spying incognitos, who appear to Winston as fellow conspirators, but are responsible for Winston and Julia's eventual arrest. At the end of the session "..... man is nothing but a beast, and like a beast, he can be degraded until he is deprived of his will, until he becomes an instrument in the hands of the Party" (Gottlieb71). Having trained the minds of their victims with physical torture, the Party is able to control reality, making its subjects believe that $2 + 2 = 5$.

Children are encouraged to become fanatical supporters of the party and to report suspicious persons, including their parents, to the government. In the novel Parsons has been spied on by his own little daughter because he said, "Down with the Party" in his sleep ("thoughtcrime") and denounced him to the Thought Police. Surveillance controls the citizens and even a tiny facial twitch ("facecrime") can result in immediate arrest and imprisonment. Directions with regard to the physical exercises known as "Physical Jerks" are given by a physical director speaking to the people from the telescreen. People have no choice but to start taking exercise in accordance with the directions.

The giant telescreen in every citizen's room also blares out annoyance by a constant stream of false propaganda designed to make the failures and shortcomings of the Party appear to be great achievements. For example, on listening to the telescreen, Winston finds that the announcer is giving all kinds of figures to show that a remarkable improvement has taken place in all fields of life whereas Winston knows that all these figures are sheer lies. Arendt (1966) observed that "the true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization" and that "the organization of the entire texture of life according to an ideology can be carried out only under a totalitarian regime" (p, 361; 363).

The Party also establishes harsh oppression through its official language, "Newspeak" Its chief aim is to reduce the vocabulary of the "Oldspeak"(traditional English) to the barest minimum, thereby making it impossible for anyone even to conceive of any rebellious thoughts that might question the Party's absolute power. Like the language of the Houyhnhnms in Part IV of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Newspeak offers no opportunity for another way of thinking different from it. In *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell himself informed us against the manipulation of language applied by state politics.

The government has an extensive method and design for altering and controlling every source of information, managing and rewriting the content of all newspapers and histories for its own ends. The Party does not allow individuals to keep records of their past. For example, at the Hate Week Rally, the Party shifts its diplomatic loyalty, so that Eurasia with which Oceania has been presently at war suddenly becomes its ally, and its former ally Eastasia

becomes its new enemy. The Party doctrine which governs this whole procedure is known as the “mutability of the past.” As a result memories become blurred and untrustworthy, and citizens become perfectly willing to believe whatever the Party tells them. By controlling the present, the Party is able to manipulate the past. The Party slogan ‘Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present controls the past’ (Orwell 44) is an important example of the Party’s technique of using history to break down the psychological independence of its subjects. “In *Nineteen Eighty –Four*, the memory of individuals is effectively manipulated, programmed, and controlled from the outside by the Party (Kolakowski 127).

Another aspect of the totalitarian regime of Oceania is “doublethink.” It means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. It is the blueprint for hundred percent political affectations. Actually it is the concept of “doublethink” that enables the Party to alter historical records and pass off these misrepresented accounts to the brainwashed populace as authentic ones. Similarly in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian fiction *The Handmaids Tale* (1985), all evidence of the past is banned from the public and the individual memory of Gileadean citizens in tragic ways by a religious and high militaristic regime.

The Party also forces individuals to repress their sexual urges because under Big Brother’s regime, sex is treated merely as a procreative duty whose end is the creation of new Party members. Sexual pleasures are forbidden because they will lead to love, human relationship and personal faithfulness, all of which threaten the Party. Desire is considered as a thoughtcrime in Oceania because it raises the individual morally or intellectually above the powers of the state to control him. The Party then directs people’s closely confined discontentment and emotion into savage displays of hatred against the Party’s political enemies. Many of these enemies, like Emmanuel Goldstein, have been invented by the Party solely for this purpose. In the novel, while contemplating the sterility of his relationship with his wife, Winston relates: “The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion” (Orwell 79). His love for Julia is the last thing that Winston gives up under torture in Room 101 by the Party.

The alleged enemies of the State are arrested, summarily tried and executed. This emphasizes the tyrannical and unpredictable exercise of power by the Party. There are public trials of traitors and thought – criminals. These men are forced to confess crimes that they have not committed. In one of his dreams Winston recalls the disappearance of his mother and baby – sister when he was ten or eleven years old. The poet Ampleforth is tortured in Room 101. His fault is that he has allowed the word “God” to remain at the end of a line in one of the poems of Rudyard Kipling when the party has strictly forbidden the use of the word “God” in Oceania. Syme, who is working on the eleventh edition of the Newspeak Dictionary, has also been executed because the Party does not like a smart and straightforward man like him. In

this way, “Perhaps, thirty people personally known to Winston, not counting his parents, had disappeared at one time or another” (Orwell 54). The Party takes care not to make martyrs of those who rebel. Therefore the course of action of the Party is to domesticate, subjugate, cure and change a rebel and only afterwards sentence him to death. This is exactly what has happened to individuals like Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford.

On the personal level, *Nineteen Eighty Four* gives us an account of the complete dehumanization of Winston Smith. He violates the Party code in several respects. He has kept a diary in which his true feelings are revealed, even though he is likely to be caught by the Thought Police. Sitting out of the view of the telescreen, he writes of his hatred for Big Brother - “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER” (Orwell 26) - several times, filling half a page. Another noteworthy entry that Winston makes in his diary is, “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows” (Orwell 92). These are the two decisive statements that have led to his downfall. Likewise, he rents the room above Mr. Charrington’s junk shop to use it as a meeting place for him and Julia, despite the obvious risks. Again Winston takes the trouble of walking among the proles because he might encounter a police patrol and might be questioned regarding his purpose in moving about in that area. He encounters a muddled old prole and tries to question him with regard to the past. Winston is in grave danger for the simple reason that his memory still functions. He indistinctly remembers life before the revolution and he gradually comes to believe that life was not always as dismal, mechanical and deadening as it is now in Oceania, although he has no means of proving it. His recollection of the old rhyme beginning, “Oranges and lemons” and his procurement of the glass paperweight are symbolic of the past. His admiration of the prole washerwoman’s song is also against the norms of the Party because she is a symbol of the future, representing the spirit of the proletariat that cannot be destroyed completely. His faith in O’Brien as a fellow disbeliever and his hopefulness in joining the Brotherhood are also against the ideals of the Party.

For all these acts of disobedience and non observance of party rules, Winston is arrested and subjected to great torture in Room 101 in the Ministry of Love. O’Brien, who seems to carry the same cynicism about the Party that Winston nurtures, misleads Winston and becomes his cross examiner and persecutor. In his encounter with Winston, O’Brien tries to appraise him on the subject of power and the rationale behind the Party looking for and clasp power. O’Brien says that the Party is eternal and its real objective is total, infinite and immeasurable power. This is how O’Brien has given Winston a representation of the future of the human society: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever”(Orwell 293). This illustration serves to highlight the violence of the cult of power. The future society in *Nineteen Eighty – Four* “exists simply to stamp out individuality and to maintain the machinery for stamping it out in devilishly perfect condition...”(Daiches 1169).

Although O'Brien tries, through argument and distress, to make Winston accept the teachings of the Party, Winston hopes to maintain his freedom and humanity. But when he is attacked by famished rats, his resistance finally breaks down. His defeat is completed only by his betrayal of Julia, the woman whom he loved. He loses his humanity and becomes another part of the political machinery. His story ends with his complete conversion and with his beginning to love Big Brother.

Greenblatt says that *Nineteen Eighty - Four*, in spite of its setting in the future, is not primarily a utopian fantasy prophesying what the world will be like in thirty or forty years but a novel about what the world is like now. Orwell knew that the problem of totalitarianism in his contemporary world could aggravate and become larger due to unpredictability in Europe's economy after the Second World War.

Orwell has projected Big Brother as the representative of dictators everywhere, like Joseph Stalin (Russia) Adolf Hitler (Germany), Mao Tse - Tung (China), Francisco Franco (Spain) and Benito Mussolini (Italy) all of whom were enthusiastically idolized by many of their followers. Drawing together technical innovations, trepidation, materialistic deficiency, misinformation and indoctrination, the society of *Nineteen Eighty - Four* symbolizes the most iniquitous system where human being is forcefully brought to the undesirable state of leading their lives in conformity to the Party line. Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty - Four* as a warning to make people aware that this type of society could exist if trends such as blustering patriotism, cruel governance of the working class and the gradual destruction of language that expresses the immensity of human experience continued. This is the only one possible future that they must strive to avoid.

Even though the title year 1984 of the novel has passed, the dangers of totalitarianism envisaged in the novel are still happening all over the world. Each of the totalitarian features accentuated in the novel was distinguishingly present in the American Society in 2010. Like the ruling Inner Party of Oceania, the financial aristocracy of the U.S. had undisputed influence over all matters of economic importance and consumption of resources. Like the "Ingsoc" of Oceania, the U. S. government destabilized the quintessence of democracy in the name of democracy itself. The execution of Saddam Hussein in December 2006 was greeted by the U. S. media with the same gasping, panting, blood thirst as Oceania's public hangings. Just as Oceania was one day allied with Eastasia and the next day at war with Eastasia, the U. S. was one day at war with Saddam Hussein and Islamic adherents, while American President Ronald Wilson Regan vigorously supported both.

The real life equivalents of the "gorilla - faced," black - uniformed guards of the Ministry of Love appear at U. S. Political conventions and outside WTO meetings, clothed in Kevlar, threatening, thrusting, or even beating unarmed protestors with batons. While going through the climatic torture scene in Room 101, we are reminded of the inventiveness of the U. S. Military - intelligence apparatus. The U.S. torture methods include the release of stinging

insects into a closed box containing a helpless and horror – stricken prisoner, rape, sexual humiliation and calculated affront of religious beliefs.

The U. S. invasion of Iraq based on fictitious weapons of mass destruction was part of its political discourse rooted in “doublethink”. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on 10 December 2009 U. S. President Barrack Obama vindicated United States’ unlawful use of force on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkan countries. Obama’s words are like the Oceanian Party Slogan “WAR IS PEACE.”

Other recent examples of places under totalitarian government include North Korea, China and Iraq. External Human Rights Organizations repeatedly report systematic human rights mishandling including persecution, slave labor, infanticide and public executions in North Korea under the rule of Kim II – sung and his successors (1948 -2011). Although China in recent years has been making advances to become a world economic power and show the international community that its citizens enjoy social and cultural freedoms, political and religious agitators continue to face imprisonment and suppression of public communication (2009 -2013). Even as Iraq steadily progresses to a democratic regime, Human Rights Organizations have reported the torture of prisoners and persecution of women and Shia communities there.

When we look at the contemporary world more closely, we can understand the potency of the warning that Orwell has given us against the totalitarian tendencies. Recent political campaigns have shown us clearly the extent to which propaganda has discredited our own language. Politicians have refined their own type of “Newspeak”. Our corporate business world today provides a shocking comparison to the hegemonic world of *Nineteen Eighty – Four*. Again, there are subliminal messages and computer viruses menacing to jeopardize information systems with possible global impact.

A book like *Nineteen Eighty – Four* has served to strengthen International Human Rights organizations like the Amnesty International (1961). As a result, more and more people the world over have realized the importance of the careful examination of the human rights and the publicizing of maltreatment. On 18 August 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed eighteen year old black man, was mortally shot by Darren Wilson, a twenty eight year old white Ferguson police officer in Missouri, an outlying district of St. Louis. First time in its history, Amnesty International sent a thirteen person delegation of human rights campaigners to hold meetings with officials and to train local activists in non- violent protest methods. The controversial circumstances of the shooting and the ensuing civil disorder received substantial attention in the U.S. and abroad. They also generated a forceful debate about law enforcement among African Americans and police use of force in Missouri and all over the world.

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