

LANGUAGE AND POWER: A FOUCAULDIAN READING OF LOIS LOWRY'S
THE GIVER

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Abstract

Lois Lowry's The Giver (1992) delineates a nightmarish utilitarian state where human beings are produced through artificial insemination for the optimal service of the state. The current paper explores how reality is constructed by power through operationalization of discourse. The Giver depicts a totalitarian state that not only contrives a systematic way of controlling the minds of its subjects but also their milieu. The regime employs genetic engineering and linguistic manipulation to keep its citizens controlled, collectivized and contented in an unusual way. The government controls the weather and topography to introduce the Concept of Sameness in the state. The totalitarian regime either erases certain words from its social fabric or transmutes them into certain bizarre concepts that are thought to be diseases which need medication. In addition, the paper also asserts that in the novel language acts as a double-edged sword that acts as oppressive as well as liberative weapon depending upon its usage.

Key Words: Control, Discourse, Dystopian Fiction, Language, Subjugation, Totalitarianism

Introduction

After birth, the first and the foremost thing a human being acquires in his life is language. Though at the embryonic stage of life, an individual is too small to speak, yet slowly but steadily he commences to learn language from his parents and surroundings. This process

continues until he reaches the culmination of his linguistic acquisition. Language enables him to express his feelings and emotions with fluency. Language is one of the prominent communicative devices that assist a person in comprehending his society as well as its social fabric. Language deepens an individual's thought and creative ability. In addition, it enhances a person's power of persuasion. However, it can be also used to manipulate power relations with others. Since ancient times, human beings have been fighting among themselves to attain power. A group of humans or individuals who taste power once want to retain it forever. For retaining power, this group contrives such strategies as enslaving people linguistically that would assist them to check all the methods that pose a threat to their position of power.

Language, Power and Dystopian Fiction

Literature portrays how language assists and abets in human emancipation as well as in human subjugation. This sort of literature first emerged in literary realms in 1932 with the publication of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. *Brave New World* is set in London in the year 2540 AD. The novel (*Brave New World*) depicts a highly stratified and class-oriented society. Here, human children mass produced in hatcheries are conditioned by a process, called hypnopedia, a sleep-learning process. In this process, babies are taught languages according to the strict specifications of the class to which they belong: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, or Epsilon. Mond, one of the state controllers, asserts that these groups "are the foundation on which everything else is built" (Huxley 195). Language, a great tool for programming people, is employed extensively in Huxley's *Brave New World*. For instance, words like "love", "motherhood", "marriage" and "parenthood" are eliminated from their acquired vocabulary because these are thought to be the vestiges of the past decadent society.

George Orwell in his iconoclastic political novel *1984* (1949) depicts how people are made docile and subservient through a process of banning a language. He conspicuously illustrates that language can be employed to delude and manipulate people to comply with government policies unquestionably. By controlling and maneuvering language, government transforms people into mindless robots who accept all propaganda as reality. Hence, language acts as a mind-controlling tool in *1984* with its ultimate objective to destroy the will and imagination of the people. The Oceanian State depicted in *1984*, censors the common language by supplanting it with new artificial and restrictive language called "Newspeak". Thirteen years later, once again the portrayal of language as a tool to control people emerges with the publication of Anthony Burgess's work *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). The novel is set in futuristic London where a repressive totalitarian state governs the populace. The totalitarian state has linguistically conditioned its subjects by eliminating moral choice and programming them to choose good over evil. However, the unconditioned protagonist of the novel, Alex, still has his own agency to act because of his unique language system called Nadsat. Alex, a fifteen-year-old teen, forms a gang with his friends; namely, Dim, Pete, and

Georgie. He along with his gang indulges in criminal activities because of the subversive and aggressive nature of the Nadsat that is almost incomprehensible to the rest of his society. Eventually, he is apprehended by the police and incarcerated where he is conditioned to the local language that deprives him of his free will. In this way, Burgess illustrates how creativity entails the freedom to choose good as well as evil. Written in 1985, Margaret Atwood's ground-breaking literary feminist dystopian work *The Handmaid's Tale* presents an eclectic scenario in the context of the curtailment of language. The text depicts a dystopian society where the freedom and liberty of women are restrained by the new theocratic government. The regime destroys not only all the past records of Handmaids but also divests them of their names. There is stringent censorship on language and reading and writing is strictly proscribed.

Language as a Medium of Control in *The Giver*

In 1993, language as a medium of control, once again, emerges in Lois Lowry's work *The Giver*. Here, Lowry gives profound importance to the precision of language. The implementation of the precision of language by the totalitarian regime and its ramifications on the general populace can be seen in the light of Foucault's concept of 'discourse' to analyse how language shapes the way reality is perceived. According to philosopher Michel Foucault, discourse exists prior to awareness, truth, and reality. In fact, it produces truth and constructs reality. This reality is disseminated in a society through culture. Foucault comprehends culture as a system of signs, both verbal and non-verbal (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 107). These signs have to be deciphered according to certain rules. These rules determine what truth is. According to Foucault actions, interpretation, opinions, and statements are all constructed according to the truth of the discourse. Foucault argues, "Each society has its regime of truth. Its 'general politics' of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements" (Foucault, *Knowledge/Power* 131). Lois Lowry's text *The Giver* can be seen by the light of Foucault's concept of discourse to analyse how language shapes the way reality is perceived.

Lois Lowry's dystopian text *The Giver* demonstrates that language is a discursive construct. In the text, the totalitarian state teaches its subjects the precision of language from childhood. Language has a vital function in maintaining the control and stability of the society. Therefore, the language prevalent in the society as well as taught to the children is devoid of thought and emotion. The society undergoes a massive transformation schemed by the regime long ago. The regime names the plan the Concept of Sameness. Under this plan, government controls the weather, removes the mountains, bans sexual intimacy even between spouses and effaces words like "love", "puberty", "colour", etc. that government thinks are unnecessary in the regime. People under the regime are conditioned through genetic

engineering in such a way that they are not only blind to colours but also incapable of suspecting the credibility of Community of Elders, the controlling body in the state.

As soon as the novel begins, the reader finds that Jonas, the protagonist of the novel, is bewildered by two incidents. First, Jonas is astounded to discern the pale eyes of an infantile lying on a basket because everyone in the community has dark eyes. Second, he steals an apple from a recreation park for which he is severely scolded by the recreation officer. Though he apologises to the recreation officer the next day for this grievous wrong, yet he is baffled not by a public show of remorse or apology but by the incident itself. Jonas is astonished by the sight of apple's red colour because he is the only individual, apart from The Receiver of Memories in the community, who is capable of seeing colour. However, he does not have the language to express his astonishment as "he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of his confusion, so he had let it pass" (Lowry 38). This, lack of language stifled Jonas's feelings, and he has no choice but to overlook his confusion.

In the context of Jonas' reaction to the realisation of colour, a discussion of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can prove handy. What drew the attention of scholars and non-scholars concurrently was a small paragraph that Sapir read out to a group of linguists in 1928. It stated that:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in a world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of a particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society . . . The fact of the matter is that 'the real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which two different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (qtd. in Salzmann 153)

Sapir attempts to argue that language is the medium by which one perceives the world, culture, reality, and thought. In addition, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claims that thoughts and behaviour of a person are determined by his language. This (Sapir-Whorf) hypothesis created a heated debate among linguists about the cogency of the hypothesis. Linguists like Eric Lenneberg and Fiona Cowie assert that Whorf-Sapir hypothesis failed to substantiate a real relationship between thought and reality. However, linguist Elaine Chaika, in support of the hypothesis opines that thought is undoubtedly dependent on language. Anna Wierzbicka, a Polish linguist, in her book *Semantics, Culture and Cognition: Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations* (1992) asks if language affects one's thought process and to what degree, as she finds that Sapir-Whorf hypothesis does not conspicuously elucidate how much one's language affects one's thought process (Wierzbicka 7). Nevertheless, Chaika in her book *Language the Social Mirror* (1989) argues, "Language and society are so intertwined that it is impossible to understand one without the other. There is no human society that does not depend on, is not shaped by, and does not itself shape language" (Chaika 2). This

statement of Chaika unambiguously describes the relationship between language thought and reality. In addition, it illustrates the view that language not only shapes how the reality is perceived, but reality can shape language as well. Hence, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis transmutes the vision of linguists about language and reality. Though there are mixed standpoints of linguists about the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, yet it is established by Stacy Philips in his article *Language and thought: Examining Linguistic Relativity* (2001) that language affects the thought process of an individual to a large extent. Dedicating his article to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and thoroughly analysing the data provided by linguistics like Kathy Sawyer and Stein Robin in their book *The Language of Color* (1999), Stacy Philips concludes that language does influence thought and the way one perceives reality to a large extent; however, language does not govern reality (Philips 6). Hence, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is very useful in the context of an analysis of power relations in totalitarian regimes.

The precision of language is of utmost importance for the totalitarian government in *The Giver* to maintain the status quo. Hence, children are indoctrinated to utter correct words at the age of two. There are punishments for uttering unofficial words. For instance, Asher a two years old child, once at lunchtime cries out, "I want a smack" instead of snack (Lowry 76). No sooner did he utter the word than the childcare specialist wields the discipline wand, a thin flexible weapon that stung painfully when it was wielded, on his hand. After this incident, the poor child stops talking completely. The government conditions its subjects linguistically so that people may not be able to think contrary to the prevalent social structure. Jonas experiences similar results of this conditioning when he is appointed by Community Members as the next Receiver of Memories. After attending his first class, he is unable to explain his feeling to his friends:

There is no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annexe room. How could you describe a sledge without describing a hill and snow; and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery magical cold? Even trained for years as they all had been in precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?" (Lowry 116-117)

Jonas is in trouble because there are no words like "sunshine", "snow", "mountain sledge", etc. in the state-authorized dictionary; that is, this dictionary is devoid of all such words. The absence of these words makes it impossible for Jonas to express his thought. Therefore, once again he remains mum among his friends. The Community has deteriorated the language into a medium devoid of reason. This deterioration assists the state to impose its will on its subjects. Moreover, linguistic deprivation makes the citizens accept their position and work jubilantly without exhibiting discontent simply because there is no alternative way to express any lingering discontent. The totalitarian state in *The Giver* believes that as long as people of the dystopian state are not acquainted with words and concepts outside their conditioning, the

jeopardy of subversive thoughts can be easily avoided. So, the people in *The Giver* are happy because there is no word “pain” in the state authorised dictionary.

Reading and writing are not forbidden in the regime; however, the government imparts only that part of literature to its subjects which facilitates as well as substantiates the propaganda of sameness in society. For instance, it is mandatory for every citizen to be well versed in the Book of Rules, a book that has legislative status in the state. Rest of the literature that imperils this propaganda is kept surreptitious. This thing comes to fore when Jonas is selected the next Receiver of Memories. The Receiver of Memories is one of the top government officials who assist the government in solving intricate problems if there are any. He is the sole individual in the whole community who is cognizant of discourses of the times before the community has been created. He has this status because past discourses endow him with wisdom to solve complicated problems of the present; otherwise, the regime does not need any person having the acquaintance of the past. He is needed when the members of society petitions to the government to increase the population of the country, so that, there may be more labourers available. At this critical juncture, the government seeks the advice of The Giver, the Receiver of Memories. The Giver uses his memories to address the problem. He finds that “the strongest memory that comes was hunger. It came from many generations back. Centuries back. The population had got so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare” (Lowry 144). Hence, The Giver advises the government to reject the petition, in order to avoid the trouble that can inflict the future generation. On entering into the dwelling of The Giver, Jonas sees an abundance of books. He is shocked to see this as:

The books in his own dwelling were the only books Jonas had ever seen. . . But this room’s walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling. There must have been hundreds—perhaps thousands of books, their titles embossed in shiny letters. Jonas stared at them. He could not imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules that governed the community? (Lowry 99)

The reason for keeping these books clandestine from the reach of common people is embodied in Foucault’s statement that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to certain number of procedures” that determine the “rules of exclusion” and “Prohibit[ion]” (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 216). In this way, totalitarian state has controlled the proliferation of other discourses to its subjects so that they may not pose a threat to the current regime. Common people are prohibited from accessing such discourses. It is only some selected government officials who can access the other discourses. They, however, are also not permitted to share their knowledge with anyone else. Jonas, the next selected Receiver of Memories, is accorded access to these books and automatically to new discourses. These books enrich his language, and subsequently, he comprehends what love is and what its connotations are, including

physical relation with a woman. This new language connects him with another discourse, and he realises that the community is in a dehumanised state rather than in a happy state.

The happiness of people in *The Giver* is a conditioning whereby they have lost the faculty to feel pain. Jonas' father, a nurturer, kills an infantile by poisoning him in a releasing ceremony. Jonas watches the ceremony from The Giver's screen when "his father began very carefully direct the needle into the top of new child's forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed. The newborn squirmed, and wailed" (Lowry 187). On watching this shocking truth, Jonas cried "He killed it! My father killed it" (Lowry 188). Now, on acquainted with the new discourse, Jonas realises what pain and happiness are. Sisk argues, "Language becomes a tool for conditioning happiness, which in turn prevents unhappiness from expressing itself in language" (Sisk 32). Thus, people cannot be unhappy unless they will have an appropriate language to express it. Language sets a barrier for its speakers, which they cannot trespass. This linguistic barrier is so strong that it does not let people acknowledge any other reality (word/words) even when they encounter it, they consider it obsolete or meaningless. For instance, when Jonas asks his father and mother whether they love him; there was an awkward silence for a moment because they (Jonas' parents) have not heard the word "love" throughout their lives. Jonas father demanded of him to correct his language. In addition, he tells him that "he has used a very generalised word, that it's become almost obsolete" (Lowry 162). Jonas father advises him that "[their] community cannot function smoothly if people do not use precise language. [His father also suggests him that instead] Jonas could ask, 'Do you enjoy me? . . .'" or "Do you take pride in my accomplishments? And the answer is wholeheartedly 'yes'." (Lowry 162). In a totalitarian regime, words become hackneyed or deciphered in some other connotations where they loses their original meaning.

The words "grand-parents", "colour", "snow", "puberty" etc., do not exist at all in the regime rather the feelings related to them are expressed by using bizarre sounding words. For instance, puberty gets transmuted into "stirrings" (Lowry 55). No matter how hard one may try, he will never be able to associate it with puberty. Puberty is thought to be a disease that needs medication. So, totalitarian state prescribes pills to its young people as soon as they arrive at the threshold of puberty to repress their sexual arousal. There is no need for human reproduction in the regime because babies are born by artificial insemination. Consequently, the totalitarian state does away with sexuality by suppressants.

Every discourse has an array of truths that acts as a touchstone in a society. Thus, only those statements that fall under this territory of discourse are validated and accepted as true. The rest of the statements that do not correspond with that discourse are either nullified or thought to be meaningless. A certain discourse triggers a certain vocabulary that is disseminated in a certain society. This language demarcates the thought process of an individual. There is often a clash of discourses that engenders dissension of ideologies among

the individuals of society. At this juncture, if one does not adjust oneself to varying discourses, it can prove fatal to one's life. For instance, before Jonas, a girl namely Mary was appointed by the government as the successor of The Giver (Receiver of Memories). When she gets all the memories from The Giver, she does not find herself competent enough to bear the burden of this new knowledge. It is because according to the Book of Rules, the Receiver of Memories is not permitted to share his/her training with others. Even if she manages courage to infringe upon rules and share her training with her friends, she could not do so as she could not explain white snow when nobody had seen it. Since there is no sunshine, there are no colours to see in this society. She was caught up between two discourses, one that contained words like "love", "sunshine", "colour", "snow," and "hills" whereas another one is bereft of all these concepts altogether. Therefore, Mary was unable to reconcile her comprehension of the past reality with the reality of her own state. Eventually, unable to bear such burden she asks for her 'release', a euphemism for death.

A response similar to the one mentioned above can be found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) as well. John, an illicit son of Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning (DHC) and Linda, is nurtured outside the World State where people still practice marriage, family, natural birth, and religion. John has read the works of William Shakespeare. Thus, he is being conditioned by works of William Shakespeare instead of World State's nurseries. Though John is not cognizant of the accurate meaning of Shakespeare's words, yet he espouses the "emotional attitudes of Shakespeare's Character's" to elucidate word around him (Sisk 28). When he is brought to World State by Bernard Max, a nonconformist of World State rules, his (John's) perception of the world is shattered. All the practices that are in vogue outside the World State are non-existent inside the Word State. In addition, the emotions he accumulates from Shakespeare's plays clash with the new societal values of World State. However, John endeavours to "fit the world he encounters into the language he has acquired," yet he fails miserably (Sisk 29). Thus, like Mary, John is trapped in two different discourses. On finding it hard to reconcile with the reality of the World State as against the reality in which John is brought up, he is derived into isolation and eventually, he commits suicide by hanging himself.

Unlike Mary and John, Jonas orchestrates a strategy to liberate himself as well as his people from the dehumanised state. There is only one way to achieve this objective; that is if he furtively succeeds in crossing the border of the community. His predecessor had told him that as soon as "he moved away from the community, he would shed the memories and leave them behind for the people" (Lowry 211). Essentially, everyone in the community will become aware about the previous discourse. As a result, people will automatically overthrow the totalitarian regime. Though at the end a reader remains in the dark about the future of Jonas, it can be said that it is the acquisition of language that opens avenues of liberation for Jonas as well as for his community.

Conclusion

When a certain language is imposed in a society through a certain discourse, people are imprisoned within the linguistic walls of that discourse. The curtailment of language through discursive imposition aims to set such a barrier for people that they cannot trespass. In fact, every discourse is employed to shape and mould the imaginative as well as intellectual impulses of an individual. Once people are enslaved linguistically, their imaginative, as well as intellectual skill, is diminished, and they are converted into mindless robots to an obsequious degree. By making use of discourse, the totalitarian regime not only censors words but also transmutes their meanings as well. When words lose their original meanings, and the new meanings associated to them are generalised as a disease, its consequences can be disastrous. In other words, this language exemplifies of a human body without the soul. Totalitarian regimes know it very well that once language is censored, thoughts automatically remain in check. Hence, depriving peoples of languages is equivalent to deprive them of their agency. For instance, until Jonas is not cognizant with previous discourse, he is servile like other subjects of the state. However, when he acquires knowledge of new discourse, he ventures to absolve himself as well as his community from dehumanisation.

Language moulds the individuality and personality of a human being. However, by giving a diffident and enslaved language, one's thoughts are hijacked, and an individual is turned into a docile body, lacking in courage. While on the other hand through the use of enthusiastic and powerful language one can become bold and courageous, ready to face any herculean challenge. Essentially, when one speaks a word, it conjures up a mental picture, and this mental picture invigorates a person to take action because words create thoughts and thoughts become actions.

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