

GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984: A POST-MODERN ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

A robust novel in terms of narrative structure, plot, themes and writing style, 1984 was chosen by TIME magazine in 2005 as one of the 100 best English language novels from 1923 to 2005. Retrospectively, TIME's November 23, 1983 issue ran the title heading 'Big Brother's Father' featured with a charcoal colour sketch of George Orwell's mugshot looking towards the ominous one eye. Early January of 2017, Orwell's 1984 shot up to the position of Amazon's best seller. It indicated a sceptical, apprehensive yet an inquisitive readership that was bowled over to discover the astounding modern-day relevance the book displayed. Declared as a 2017 must-read by the New York Times, authoritative scholarship and research regarding 1984 has been abundant. Yet, the novel continues to enthrall, stimulate and puzzle. However, at the heart of the novel is a blossoming love story that is often overlooked if not side lined. Firstly, this paper analyses the features of a post-modern world in 1984 manufactured under the patronage of oligarchical capitalism that leads to the dismantling of regular human interactions. Secondly, it dissects the protagonist, Winston Smith's loss of family and sense of belonging. Thirdly, it highlights the elements of a romance in 1984.

Key words: Orwell, 1984, post-modern, romance, love

Orwell is one of the key writers of the modern era. Finding an anxious readership in today's "post-truth era" (Keyes), *1984* portrays the state of love in a post-modern world. It demonstrates the tattered state of love as individuals prepare to brave the onslaught of the Mundus Novus or New World. The root of the problem lies in personal estrangement where the characters are so aloof from their own conscience that they fail to bond whole heartedly with anybody else.

Before the Great War, Italian architect Antonio Sant' Elia mentioned, "The Modern House is like a Great Machine." Besides the surprising juxtapositioning of the words 'house' and 'machine' is the use of the term 'house' instead of 'home'. *1984* begins in media res with the protagonist Winston Smith entering his residential building The Victory Towers. The building is indented with modern monolithic structural monumentalism. This is his place of residence but it cannot be nurtured into a healthy home, let alone a home in any sense of the

term. This is because it has none of the warmth, cosiness or personalization that usually makes a house a home. It is then an extension of the 'irridenta' that the Party has a right to forcefully claim.

Winston lives alone in this space which is the alternative to his place of work. The décor of his neighbour Parson's apartment is also not replete with personal wall hangings but exudes allegiance to the Party as seen in "On the walls were scarlet banners of the Youth League and Spies, and a full- sized poster of Big Brother" (Orwell 21). The world has invaded the home and there is little distinction between the outdoors and the indoors. The door then provides an illusion of separation which may be capable of providing some formal, physical limitations but no privacy. The sight from the window is no different either as reflected in "It was the Police Patrol, snooping into people's windows" (Orwell 2). The fact that people mostly disappear in the middle of the night or that Party members may enter into the houses at any time to arrest anyone probably suggests the apartment as a "lock-up" into which one needs to go back directly after work.

Living on the seventh floor of one of the fewer skyscrapers in the locale, this compartmentalized modern architecture of Victory Towers is every bit utilitarian, defensive, easily constructible and part of an urban conurbation. It echoes Corbusier's statement, "A house is a Machine for living in" (Barry 81). Such pronouncements of the opening scene take the reader to the 'shoebox' and 'carbuncle' buildings which retain a high idealism that represents its power (Barry 81). The cityscape from his window defines a modern -day metropolis. Miniluv is described as a frightening building with a windowless architecture, difficult to enter except on "official business" (Orwell 4). It can be done so only by penetrating through a maze of barbed wire entanglements, steel doors and hidden machine gun nests (Orwell 5). Its architecture reflects a modern manifestation of the inward chaos validating Adolf Loos term "decoration is crime" or Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" (Barry 81).

This tends towards a minimalism that is embryonic not only in the sense that it is nascent but also restrictive. Startlingly, Miniluv is windowless reflecting on the suffocating state of love in Oceania. While love may usually be understood as an escape from daily drudgery, it can also be rejuvenating, fulfilling and constructive. However, here, the lack of windows suggests the destructive aspect of love. It does not provide any freedom and does not make one free. In fact, falling in love or being in love is one of the most dangerous things to do. Additionally, if home is where the heart is, then a hardened heart becomes a wanderer in turn causing a continuous homelessness. Winston's constant wonderment at the state of affairs in Oceania is a mixture of curiosity, incredulity, revulsion and incomprehension making him a wanderer in search of an unknown, unreachable destination. The panopticon that Oceania is, no doubt messes with the psyche of its prisoners.

Winston is an archetypal inmate who illustrates the function of discipline as an apparatus of power. Winston's vagabondage in particular shows symptoms of the death row

phenomenon. Confessing into his diary may seem to be an act of secretly admitting his woes despite knowing the dire consequences. “How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present in which case it would not listen to him, or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless” (Orwell 7). However, this period of difficulty and withdrawal leads to his diary entries which are more akin to suicide notes.

Winston is critical of the “vistas of rotting 19 century houses” (Orwell 3). One can imagine the largely romantic medieval Gothic style of architecture that dominated Victorian London as an asymmetrical, anti-Palladian preference of design. The visual is equated to chicken houses (Orwell 3). Their sides are shored up with barks of timber and their windows are patched with cardboard, hinting at the meagre materials used for outer cover (Orwell 3). Their roofs are said to be patched with corrugated iron which may hint at the use of cast iron and steel for several buildings as a blending of Neo -Classical conventionality with Egyptian and Oriental themes. There is the presence of greenery but these “crazy garden walls sagging in all directions” are mostly unkempt hanging trees and bushes that are equally distasteful (Orwell 3). Garden walls refer to the borders of gardens that separate one property from another. “Sagging” shows that they are not maintained well. Wall gardening on the other hand, is an ancient concept dating back to the Babylonians. Vertical gardening using grapevines on garden trellises gained momentum in Britain and America of the 1920s using climbers and creepers. Since Orwell does not go into specific details about the types of plants used, it may be added that climbing roses were symbols of secret gardens adding to the murkiness of the ministries. It may indicate a metaphoric contrast between row houses of middle- income localities in comparison to the towering sky scrapers of commercial work areas such as Minitrue or tall residential buildings like Victory Mansions. Victory Mansions is also really old, perhaps built in 1930s and tattered. Its ceiling leaks, the plaster is flaking, several pipes have burst, and there is bad heating. All repairs are to be done individually and takes several years to be sanctioned if it has to be done by committees.

In this blend of Victorian and modern the four ministries have prominent structures with Oriental leanings in the cityscape. Minitrue is described as a pyramidal structure of white concrete having 3000 rooms above ground level and multifarious implications hidden below. A pyramid is a three- dimensional triangle in which all the sides meet at the apex. It is suggestive of the multidimensionality of the mysteries behind these ministries. The base is large and made of bigger building blocks than the tip which suggests durability, completeness, stability and symmetry. The structure reflects the reality of a superior order.

If girdled around the pyramid from the bottom towards the top or vice-versa in a single continuous stroke then it gives rise to the most intriguing shape in the history of symbolism: a spiral. The ministries then symbolize gateways or portals that only get murkier with numerous contradictions. When stagnant, the spiral like a Yeatsian gyre alternates between order and growth comparable to the Chinese Ying and Yan. When in motion, the

spiral suggests a dual movement of inward journey and uncertainty; from top to bottom or bottom to top depending on the perception of the viewer. It is in line with the ministry as the essence of life (DNA helix); flexibility or slipperiness (a spring instrument); pointing singly towards the open sky to the Over lordship that is represented by Big Brother. This spiral is also indicative of the never- ending twists and turns that the upheavals of the plot goes through. It is the twisted mentality of characters like O'Brien and party workers to the interminable twisting of hopes, dreams, wishes into a severe exasperation that is almost nauseating. The entire system of Oceania enhances human slavery to Big Brother and his aides. One is left with no option but to submit to this Deus ex Machina condition or "God out of Machine." Frank Lloyd Wright writes in *The Art and Craft of the Machine*, "In the machine lies the future of art and craft." Le Corbusier adopts two decades later, "A house is a machine for living in."

In this world of surveillance Winston feels like he is born into bondage. Darkness here is relative not only of the darkness outside in the surroundings but also within only found in the darkest corners of his own unknown self. When nothing can be known about the true self then creating human bonds is a matter of purposeful alliance and not an emotional decision. It is a useful pact that may or may not take place.

At thirty- nine years of age, his variedly interpretative gaze at several male and female characters exhausts his search for people in whom he can find a 'home.' He is a mere speck in this Citta Nuova or New City.

Winston is able to remember his father only as a faint memory, "dark and thin, dressed always in neat dark clothes and wearing spectacles" (Orwell 29). He is of firm belief that only his mother loved him truly and was loyal. It is only in this vision that he is able to enjoy any familial affection. This vision is an example of the post- traumatic stress that he has been going through ever since he became an orphan at a young age.

His mother is described physically as "tall, statuesque, rather silent woman with slow movements and magnificent fair hair" (Orwell 29). The thin soles of his father's shoes show a wearing out that is similar to the worker he looks at from his window in the first chapter. His sister is described as a silent, small baby with bright eyes. His mother and sister had no reproach in their hearts or minds. Like Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, Winston feels personally guilty for their death of which he has traces of a vision. It is a metaphorical drowning, earthing or burying. He cannot come to terms with this loss. "His mother's memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return, and because somehow, he did not remember how, she had sacrificed herself to a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable" (Orwell 30).

He is hit by pangs of existential angst and despair. In recalling familial bonds, his world suddenly loses all value and equates to the absurd world of Big Brother to suggest no other meaning beyond the meaning given to it. It is this meaninglessness which encompasses the amorality or the unfairness of the world. It is only in the bond between him and his

mother that he finds any “dignity of emotion” (Orwell 30). He would yell at his mother for food and eat up his sister’s portion of chocolate. The past and the future juxtapose in this vision with the image of the dark- haired girl tearing away her clothes and revealing her nakedness. Her bold flawlessness makes him think of her as a piece of literature that holds utmost value in the eyes of the world. He wakes up with the word “Shakespeare” on his lips. Familial ties are broken and Winston roams about like a vagabond in search of a family that does not exist anymore. It is this hollowness that leads to a desperation which anticipates the second chapter.

Denoting a mob culture, the two minutes hate is a psychological training session for the upcoming Hate Week. Though the commander is only present on television which is the ‘instrument’ present everywhere, yet the hate provokes, instigates and expects people to voluntarily join in. Studies by Quinn and Cameron propose a framework of competing values of which Oceania reflects a hierarchy culture of management through several structured layers of regulatory methods carried out periodically. Despite the presence of an adhocratic clan culture, there is no encouragement towards any entrepreneurial endeavours. Loyalty through a paternalistic style of governance is only to meet a single goal: the reverence of Big Brother. In this case the extent of employee satisfaction is not just low but also redundant.

Most of the female characters are portrayed by Orwell as mute and dumb actors of outer realities thrust on them by Big Brother. They have very little individuality except Julia.

Winston sees Julia and presumes she is from the Fiction Department as he may have seen her earlier with oily hands and carrying a spanner (Orwell 9). She is introduced through her physicality: “She was a bold looking girl of about twenty- seven, with thick dark hair, a freckled face, and swift, athletic movements” (Orwell 10). Her sidelong glance feels piercing to Winston making him fill up with black terror (Orwell 10). “He knew the reason. It was because of the atmosphere of hockey fields and cold baths and community hikes and general clean-mindedness which she managed to carry about with her” (Orwell 10). Despite his hatred for her outward prudishness, Winston feels an instant attraction towards her that is described as a peculiar uneasiness which has fear mixed up with hostility (Orwell 10).

Emotions run riot as people go from simple hateful words to jumping on their seats. The dark- haired woman who later turns out to be Julia, cries ‘swine’ thrice and flings a heavy newspeak dictionary at the tv. While the crowd comprises of individuals yet individual thought, opinion and identity is very different from the crowd. Though the ultimate motive of the hate is to assert the pervasive presence of Big Brother and glorify his thought system, the hate shows several kinds of personal and interpersonal emotions all in under two minutes. The crowd goes from spectator to demonstrator with a dynamism that is equally expressive and aggressive. While they are being indoctrinated on the one hand, this is also the only time they at all get to come out of stoic existence. It is a deliberate self- hypnosis that they have to engage in, a careful drowning of consciousness by means of a rhythmic noise as mass hysteria takes over during the chanting of “BB”. Winston remains under a spell bound

bystander effect. The chants deindividuate him into participating in this overlapping amalgamation. This ingroup is not inclusive, friendly or shares collective interests. Emotional cohesivity all throughout *1984* lies in realizing instinctual habits. The terms habit and instinct put together is ironical but Winston claims that, "Living is habitual and living by habit becomes instinct."

While consorting with prostitutes is forbidden in Oceania, Winston's only other vision is his escapade with a girl who had painted her face white and lips red. His nervousness holds him back while he tries to confess further of his sexual ordeals. His basic needs of food and sex are tarred and his guilt knows no bounds. As eroticism is the real enemy of the Party, its agenda is to control emotional loyalties between men and women. "The only recognised purpose of marriage was to beget children for the service of the Party. Sexual intercourse was to be looked on as a slightly disgusting minor operation, like having an enema" (Orwell 65).

Julia enters into Winston's life just when his thoughts reiterate that a real love affair is an almost unthinkable event (Orwell 68). What they do enjoy other than thinking along similar lines about the Party and sharing similar tastes, is good sex and "the sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion" (Orwell 68). This is forecasted by the telescreen that relays the ditty, "Under the spreading chestnut tree/ I sold you and you sold me:/ There lie they and here lie we/ Under the spreading chestnut tree" (Orwell 77).

The second chapter is the crux of the romantic angle within the novel. According to the lead female actor Kristen Stewart, the film adaptation of *1984* titled *Equals* has "a love story of epic, epic, epic proportion." Surprisingly, Winston's apprehensions translate into reality and the dark-haired girl that he was fetishizing over for so long turns out to be Julia. Etymologically, Julia is derived from its Latin word meaning 'youthful' and is the feminine form of Julius. It is also the name of a character in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The gender quo is surprisingly altered as it's she who initiates conversation by dropping a chit of paper. Not only is her audacity to do something that sort bold and rattling but so are the words she writes. She confesses her feelings by scribbling on the piece of paper: "I love you."

Assuming that she's a spy, Winston wants to smash her head with a cobblestone. However, Julia's short hair and boyish overalls maintain an outward androgyny. She is at once the archetypal maiden wearing the scarlet sash around her waist while exuding eternal youthful confidence and the archetypal mystic who uses her intellect to arrange their meeting. Seemingly sagacious, she takes up the role of the man in their relation and plans everything out well in advance. She decides the venue of their meeting as well as the timing and the manner in which they should meet. Winston is clueless and can only follow the directions. She is beautiful but he is not valiant. He can barely be her knight in a shining armour as he constantly doubts her to be a spy or member of the Inner Party.

Looking up to her as the ideal is the centrality of focus for Winston. The idealization is in sharp contrast to a reflection on their society and a political representation of Oceania. The

double valence that is built into the narrative structure of the romance fails to identify with the lords and ladies of the story. It speaks for a class of people that do not serve in any high ranks of official order. Despite being different from the feudal system of the medieval times, 1984 has a strictly built in systematic order of hierarchy that is technologically monitored to be kept in place at all times. In all of this, Julia is the ideal for Winston that is highly desired but difficult to achieve.

Their pastoral retreat into the woods enhances the escapist genre with marked interruption of passionate pleasure: "Winston and Julia clung together, fascinated" (Orwell 124). The heroic identity that they achieve leads to a compatibility between erotic and military pursuits. Though they consider their love making as a political act that is a blow against the Party, their liaison in turn only reinforces the larger systems of the Party. The basic quest through which Winston is initiated is paralleled to the pressures of love. This tension between Eros and chivalry is a central romance motif. Their frequent meetings become longer and more complex without achieving any greater sophistication. A central set of topoi are endlessly repeated: a historically and geographically remote setting, separation and reunion and disguise and recognition (Fuchs 79).

Their self- confessed lunacy is seen when they decide to rent the room above Mr. Charrington's place. Their endeavours are as unfragmented, disjointed and absurd as the world that surrounds them and the world they try to create with each other. Winston's midlife crisis is thrust up on Julia who turns out to be a physical necessity for him (Orwell 139). He wishes they had been a married couple of ten years standing and walk through the streets openly and freely. Though they know that they will not survive long without being caught, they continue their meetings and making love. Physical communion commemorates intellectual union as they fear their end coming soon: "When once they get hold of us there will be nothing, literally nothing, that either of us can do for the other" (Orwell 166). However, they do not betray one another as Julia says, "If they could make me stop loving you- that would be the real betrayal" (Orwell 166). Julia is the first to break in with a denial of leave-taking when questioned by O'Brien. Winston too can only find respite in the company of Julia. But through Winston romancing Julia, no dynastic succession will ever follow. That is one thing they can never achieve.

Love is grilled to be dissected into a tattered and hopeless thing that has no rootedness in civil society. It is the act of love that is equated to service to the Party and not an expression of personal fulfilment. It is a part of a larger propaganda and may seem momentarily surreal but is on the whole seen as a futile practice. It brings Winston and Julia a fleeting sense of belonging and mutual reciprocation but they have to remain far from higher realization. Investigating the opportunities that their rebellion, revolution and romance provide in Oceania, it can be concluded that there is no room for differences, individuality and innovativeness. Love that needs to be cultivated with hope, faith, peace of mind and honesty cannot flourish where there is a degeneration of positive human emotions. This outer

fragmentation adds to the inner fragmentation of the characters. It only allows room for loneliness and hopelessness or perpetual servitude to the Party.

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