



“1984”: A study on repressed sexuality and individual rebellion

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between civil sexuality and political despotism in the name of individual freedom. The idea of absolute power over citizens' wishes to have sex in *1984* plays a pivotal role in making the protagonist Winston revolt against the oppressive party stance to the citizens of Oceania. This paper will also explore the idea of centralized power and the failure of the individual rebellion. Finally, it will elaborate the role that sexuality plays in the 21st century to liberate people from the oppressive nature of politically incorrect “taboo culture” and social and religious orthodoxy that a state plays in the name of balancing cultural chastity.

Keywords: sexuality, revolt, political orthodoxy, individual resistance

1. Introduction

George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* is, in many ways, different from the traditional modes of eroticism and sexuality. In the novel, he tries to explore a post war pseudo apocalyptic domain where the citizens' life has been observed under microscopic control via technology. The omnipresent godlike construct that Orwell depicts in the novel is the ever-evolving Big Brother and his projected fears wafted up everywhere from the streets to the innermost space of bedroom with a slogan “Big Brother is watching you.” In the novel, we can easily relate the concept of sexual regulation portraying major characters who have been condemned for having romantic relationship and intimate physical involvement. Sex as seen in the novel is a powerful tool that the party or the state uses against its citizens so that their notion of human interaction can be controlled. The protagonist of this novel, Winston, playing the role as Rubin, describes a “damsel in distress” (217). He battles to discover the humane side of him that is capable of love and intimacy. In *1984*, love has been represented as the clear antithesis of what the party thrives to establish—the ultimate control over the citizens of Oceania. This paper uncovers the overwhelming strife of ‘sexual liberty’ that Winston contrives in the course of the novel amidst a politically dominated church like state and all sorts of surveillances. Individual freedom and political space are the major concerns of today's world. This paper deeply examines the possibility of the prophetic thought that Orwell envisioned in this magnum opus.

2. Background and Theoretical Underpinnings

The story revolves around the protagonist Winston in the ‘future’ of *1984*. The world is separated into three superstates named—Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. These states are in constant battles with each other, almost in a deadlocked condition. The countries are mostly matched by their power and strength that it is quite impossible to win for any one of them. The idea of the war put these countries in to a strange trinity of evil. The real reason for this ‘war’ is to keep the economy running while the productivity of these

nations can be kept to the optimum level. The citizens of these super countries live in the state of constant fear except a few who are privileged and powerful. The idea of ‘personal property’ appears as a taboo to the people living in these states. The protagonist Winston Smith lives in Oceania, the English speaking super-nation. This nation is controlled by the centre of power known as the ‘party’. The name ‘party’ is a combination of a dystopic, despotic power-hungry and a sexually orthodox nation. The other two states, both Eurasia and Eastasia are closely similar to the same political notion. There are two separate circles of the party: the inner party and the outer party. The inner party consists of the people who actively govern the state of Oceania and the outer circle comprises of the people who execute the command of the inner party members. The rest of the people are proles who are intellectually incapable of organizing a revolt. The Proles are mostly workers who actively carry out the orders of the party. Orwell describes these three groups through the following words:

The aims of these three groups are entirely irreconcilable. The aim of the High is to remain where they are. The aim of the Middle is to change places with the High. The aim of the Low, when they have an aim—for it is an abiding characteristic of the Low that they are too much crushed by drudgery to be more than intermittently conscious of anything outside their daily lives -is to abolish all distinctions and create a society in which all men shall be equal (171).

In order to keep its power, the party keeps its citizens under strict control—they run a constant surveillance over the citizens through ‘thought police’. The party has created a propagandist language which is known as ‘Newspeak’, designed to control free-thought that invokes citizen's power. The common ideology of this language is an idea that Orwell described as ‘doublethink’ which is reflected in the Party's hegemonic war cries: “War is peace,” “Freedom is slavery,” and “Ignorance is strength” (87).

Winston Smith is an outer party member living in London

shattered by a nuclear war. His job is to rewrite history in the Ministry of Truth, bringing it in line with current political thinking. By performing unquestionable orders for the party Winston's inner voices leap affront and he becomes a rebel. In his secret journal, he wrote his first word of rebellion: "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" (15). At some point of the novel, he was hysteric and courageous at same vein, as he chants, "they'll shoot me I don't care they'll shoot me in the back of the neck I don't care down with big brother they always shoot you in the back of the neck I don't care down with big brother—" (16).

He later embarks on a forbidden romance with a likeminded woman Julia who also does not like the oppressive nature of Big Brother/the party. Winston rents an apartment surrounded by the proles who are the people with little caliber to overthrow the 'empire'. Winston and Julia kept on their steamy romance growing. Winston also grows curiosity about the 'Brotherhood' which is a rebellious group that is composed mostly with the party quitters. What Winston and Julia did not know that they have been constantly being watched over by the Big Brother. Throughout the city there are posters pasted with the warning, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (1).

When Winston is approached by an inner party member named O'Brien disguised as a secret member of the brotherhood. Winston failed to realize so because it was a trap. O'Brien, a spy of the party, is assigned to find out the "though-criminals." Winston and Julia eventually get caught by the Ministry of Love for reeducation. They were psychologically tortured by the officials. The idea of the torture is to break Winston and Julia psychologically in order to weed out their conception of freedom. In Room 101, Winston is exposed to a cage with rats, which is Winston's worst nightmare. In one incident Winston was terrified by rats,

"Don't go on!" Said Winston, with his eyes tightly shut.

"Dearest! You've gone quite pale. What's the matter? Do they make you feel sick?"

"Of all horrors in the world—a rat!" (122).

In Freud's seminal book titled *The Problem of Anxiety*, he explains that there are: anxiety about the loss of love, anxiety about loss of the object (caretaker), castration anxiety and super-ego or social anxiety (56). Mostly anxiety led phobias, which are a flight from the anxiety aroused by forbidden impulses, utilize avoidance to protect the individual from temptation arousing situations that Freud also sees as superstructure of greater submission to threat (2939). As the rats attached to his head and Winston yells out, "Do it to Julia" and states that he does not care what happens to Julia (243). Now we know that with this betrayal the fate of Winston has been sealed. He saved his and Julia's life. Later at the end of the novel he encounters Julia and neither one is interested in the other. Winston finally learns to love Big Brother.

Sex in *1984* plays a pivotal role in making Winston revolt against the oppressive party stance against the liberation of the libidinal urge of the citizens of Oceania. In order to train the citizens of Oceania, the omnipresent Big Brother remains as the the divider or the extreme separator against family values. The emotive function of family has been suppressed by the overt projection of Big Brother presented

as 'godlike' stature. Sex in "1984) becomes oblique due to the transmitted hegemony that has been propagated by the state, "No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer" (220). The party acts both as a conservative religious organisation and as a mind controlling state of affairs. The bleak future that Orwell tries to project is a overshadow of fear that we all think that could happen to us. The oppressive nature of the party suggests that there are more than that of the sex that the party is trying to control. It wants the sex from the people of Oceania and if possible other parts of the 'living' world. Power as Orwell thinks has the ability to usher the incomprehensible force of forcing its citizens into the realm of sexual 'relocation' that is what Winston thinks as the instinct which "creates a world of its own" (110).

3. Repressed Sexuality and Individual Freedom

Sexuality creates a hub for all kinds of interaction among the humans which sometimes create the possibility of revolt against the oppressive nature of the centre which in this regard is the party. It wants to destroy the "The sex instinct" that is opening up the possibility of rebels like Winston and Julia. Through the control of marriages and sexual needs, the party acts as a conservative religious organisation that vows to make procreation as a a commodity which can be bought by sanctioned ration cards and the party claims that in any point in future, they will "abolish the orgasm" (220). In order not to wake the connection between feverish sex and chastity that creates intimate humane relationship and the political anarchy which the party thinks from its orthodox practice the oppressive model of orthodoxy has been introduce in Oceania (111). To the party sex is an act of rebellious infliction for the centre. The Big Brother as an image works as opposite of sex in the making of an upright nation full of willing non-sexual participants.

For Winston the revolt or the voices inside him are not necessarily rebellious but also, they are humane because he wants to feel the human experience both as a biological and political entity. Michele Foucault comments on the liberation of sexual practices in the wake of the as the "time direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions.....it was a period when "bodies made display of themselves"" (3). In Orwell's novel, the future walks in an opposite direction where the society is mostly placed under the idea of a sexually suppressed authoritarian government where sexual privacy echoes Foucault's notion of sexual "repressive hypothesis". In *The History of Sexuality* as Foucault tries to explore is the history of repression due to its private nature as it sits opposite the powerful to rule the peripheral subscribers of the society as the threat of constructing an absolute power (34). In *1984* the idea of thought becomes an inspiring factor as it works as the avatar of freedom for both Winston and Julia. The voices in Winston's head lead him to do scribblings in the diary, they become fully grown meaningful thoughts and later actions preceded his fate both being love with Julia and also to reject her under torture.

In the novel, Winston's view towards the totalitarian regime seems a universal outcry that matches our ability to understand the oppression and to reject it. He also wants us to show the importance of the politics of the body in a very larger aspect. The importance of the politics of body is a promising field that evolves throughout the novel as we come to see when Julia passed him down saying "I love

you”, he thinks of dying which continued in their later meetings he said,

“We are the dead”, he said.

“We are not dead yet”, said Julia prosaically (115).

Winston’s fear leads him to the libidinal side of escape; the moment Julia offers her sex by saying “...would you sooner sleep with, me or a skeleton? Don’t you enjoy being alive...she twisted herself around and pressed against him, He could feel the breasts, ripe yet firm, through the overalls. Her body seemed to be pouring some of its youth and vigour into his.

“Yes I like that”, he said (*ibid*).

As Thomas Horan claims that major dystopian authors especially Orwell “presents sexual desire as an aspect of the self that can never be fully appropriated” (314). In *1984* sex is depicted as something that the Big Brother has difficulty in submitting on the back side as depicted,

There was a direct, intimate connection between chastity and political orthodoxy. For how could the fear, the hatred, and the lunatic credulity which the Party needed in its members be kept at the right pitch, except by bottling down some powerful instinct and using it as a driving force? The sex impulse was dangerous to the Party, and the Party had turned it to account (112).

The puritan nature of the party allows it to choose to regulate sexuality of citizens. In *The History of Sexuality*, French Philosopher Michel Foucault examined the relationship between sexuality and power. His idea of repressive hypothesis allows us to see the major elemental aspect of sexuality in all terms and forms which have been repressed by the means of political and religious control (3). In Winston’s case we can see very clearly that the party not necessarily wants to repress his freedom but it also wants to take away his freedom to have sex with anybody he wants. Being an outer circle member he knows for sure that,

In the old days, he thought, a man looked at a girl’s body and saw that it was desirable, and that was the end of the story. But you could not have pure love or pure lust nowadays. No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act (107).

Winston finds the intimate act as political movement. In his rebellion, he remains emotional throughout, and moreover, he is afraid of the party as well as the war. The sexual relationship that Winston has with Julia is a sharp polar opposite the relationship with his wife Katherine; the earlier one is an act of revolt against the party and the latter is the duty to the party as both Julia and Katherine are parts of the system, members of the party. The Big Brother as opposed to the idea of love is an anti-love. *1984* is a novel full of people who are ambivalent with themselves as well as their realities that surround the actual conception of “true” and “false” statements (Bowen). The individualistic revolution of Winston is part of his evolving curiosity about the past. This leads him to the path for an alternate direction against

the party. Love that Winston feels about Julia is the ultimate freedom that Julia has on her sexuality. Winston loves the idea that not only dependant on sexuality that matters in a relationship but the warmth of love as he explains what it feels like to a party victim—

The terrible thing that the Party had done was to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings, were of no account, while at the same time robbing you of all power over the material world. When once you were in the grip of the Party, what you felt or did not feel, what you did or refrained from doing, made literally no difference. Whatever happened you vanished, and neither you nor your actions were ever heard of again (139-140).

In *1984*, sexual regulation plays an integral part in understanding the individual “unrest” felt by Winston. Orwell seems to have shown interest in the values than the west presumes that there are two standard ways of establishing laws of regulating sexual behaviour: the first is to establish these laws according to the rules of morality, which favour a high degree of sexual regulation and the other is sexual regulation according to a more liberal ideology that encourages people to autonomously decide what kinds of sexual behaviours are socially acceptable. Orwell seems to have gone to the other direction, he prefers the consideration in sexual regulation in terms of the political consequences and how a certain degree of sexual regulation benefits social organizations. As Robin argues what led Orwell in writing something that considers an all-out polar contrary to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*,

In his argument for sexual privacy Orwell assumes two things about power. First that “power is the willingness and ability to kill, control manipulate, oppress, humiliate and torture other human beings” (244). Second that power is most dangerous in the form of a concentrated state power. West outline two contradictory ways to respond to unconstrained state power: foundational faith in the protective properties of the law and rebellion, “unregulated, naturalistic, animalistic, erotic, hedonistic, pleasure-for-pleasure’s-sake sex [that is] a politically rebellious act and, particularly, a political act of defiance against states, state power, and state authority” (247). These two reactions to unchecked state power are usually mutually exclusive but in Nineteen Eighty Four Orwell suggests that both rational law and irrational sex are effective responses to a concentrated, and therefore dangerous, state power (West).

Sex can not only be an expression of centralized power that most hedonistically collides with the polar opposite private power in public space. As such laws and regulations become more malignant to first put the sexual need under surveillance and then to abolish or control them from private space. In the novel these legal constraints could not bar Winston and Julia from having an affair. They not only crossed the regulatory boundary but also put the establishment of the party under threat.

4. Conclusion

Orwell’s *1984* creates an explanation that allows us to think

about to certain height these “closely-knit” sexual and political fantasies with deep attention. This public-spirited fallacy and the power drive that constantly barred the vision of freedom is a conscious act of achieving the construct of a coercive state. Orwell’s vision of future is not very far-fetched because we now have regulatory states—countries that are spying on its citizens and we feel utterly helpless to stop so. The government’s surveillances in the private sphere are quite dominant as envisioned by Orwell. The power of the ‘party’ is a symbol of hegemony and both the country and the empire want us to believe in. The novel *1984* dwells on the aspirations drawn from both Winston and Julia. They are us, striving for personal and political freedom. Our sex has been banished to unrealistic pornographic images that are “ghastly rubbish” and repetitively “boring” and relaying on just swapping around and unlike Foucault, Orwell stated that “Neither we, our sex, our experiences, our truths, our loves, our laws, or our nature is exclusively a product of power. And because they are not, they can be destroyed by it” (260). The year 1984 came and vanished before we realize what Orwell envisioned. But in the real space, in the political market the overwhelming effect of control is eminent and unsettling. The realm of power has been shifted to the alluring tyranny of technological progression. We may not have the Big Brother but we have the “democratic” that nations clasp none less than the same as the totalitarian government. As we enjoy more freedom in a technologically dominated world but the real freedom might come from the individual’s freedom of sexuality.

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