

Book Review

Nineteen Eighty-Four

Nineteen Eighty-Four, by George Orwell, Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2011, III+325. ISBN: 9780143416302

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George Orwell, in the book under review, takes the readers on a journey of a fictional historical timeline after the real events of World War II. Orwell alarms the readers of the dangers of an all-encompassing and powerful regime that has been allowed to gain and maintain power. The third person writing employs nuanced symbolism by paralleling and referencing actions, objects and persons to the real world and is, therefore, a very interesting read. Orwell's experiences with cruel regimes of this era culminated in this twentieth-century classic.

Winston Smith, the main character, is introduced in a post-World War II dystopia. The year is supposedly 1984, and the world consists of three super states in a perpetual state of war: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. The totalitarian ruling party of Oceania, INGSOC (English Socialist Party), is headed by Big Brother, a figure whose poster appear throughout Airstrip One (formerly Britain). The party rules with an iron fist. Individual expression is not allowed. *Telescreens*, which are in every home and office, disseminate party propaganda and spy on people. Thought police (secret loyal party adherents who protect its integrity) work actively to quell any act of dissent against the party. Here, Orwell shows the insurmountable power totalitarian regimes can wield with the advancement of technology.

Winston, who works in the Records Department of Ministry of Truth in Airstrip One, alters records of the past according to the desires of the party. For example, rewriting a newspaper article which makes it seem like Big Brother had predicted enemy troop movements, while contradictory information is purged into the 'memory hole' (a furnace). Winston faintly remembers a time before the party acquired power, and he develops a distaste for what the party had done to him and society. One day, he commits 'thought crime' (engaging in actions or thoughts which are anti-party) when he writes in a diary. This is where Orwell highlights the precarious nature of individual thought and expression in a surveillance society. Winston writes in the diary simply because "the beautiful creamy paper deserved to be written on" (p.8). He has no idea why and for whom he is writing. Despite knowing it being punishable by death, he pens down his thoughts. Orwell means to remind us of the sacredness of free expression and individual actions – which is not to be given up.

During 'Two Minutes Hate' event, a screening where the party directs the anger of the audience against Emmanuel Goldstein, who is supposedly the prime enemy and nemesis of Big Brother and the party, Winston catches the glimpse of an O'Brien. He is convinced that O'Brien shares his hatred of Big Brother. Winston also notices another person, a dark-haired girl, Julia. He initially despises

her for her ostensible reverence of the party but he is attracted to her at the same time.

In a conversation with Winston in the canteen, Syme from Research Department, reveals their intent to limit vocabulary to the point where revolutionary thoughts against the party cannot be formulated in 'Newspeak' (the official language of Oceania). Like this, the book does raise interesting thought experiments: if the vocabulary of our native tongue was eliminated to a significant degree, would we be able to think complex thoughts?

Winston and Julia rent a room from Mr. Charrington after they get closer to each other. They promise that they will never let the party betray each other. Later on, they visit O'Brien in his mansion and declare for Goldstein's cause. Unbeknownst to both, O'Brien turns out to be a thought police and had been aware of Winston's activities from the start. The members of the thought police barge in and take them to the Ministry of Love for correction. Winston is conditioned with torture, and his entries in his diary are used against him: O'Brien succeeds in inculcating 'doublethink'

¹ in Winston, even getting him to accept that $2+2=5$, not 4. To completely break Winston, O'Brien decides to take him to *Room 101*. A chamber where worst nightmares of individuals are used against them - it was rats in Winston's case. A contraption is set over Winston's head; starved and carnivorous rats will devour his face if O'Brien presses a lever. In horror, Winston cries out that Julia takes his place. O'Brien feels satisfied and releases him from Ministry of Love. Winston and Julia meet randomly on the streets and both confess that they betrayed one another. They are both husks of their former selves and unable to love each other. Now, Winston frequents the Chestnut Tree Café where he works on sub-committees and "he loved Big Brother" (p.311).

Why is it that the party is so successful in controlling everyone? Like any other state, it too has a monopoly on coercion. Winston succumbs to it. So, what keeps the majority of Oceania in check? Foucault's 'panoptic discipline' provides an explanation. While studying power, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, explains 'panoptic' social control in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). The panopticon is an architectural design made to ensure that the watched is always unaware of the watcher. The watcher can see all, while the watched has no way to know if they are being watched at any given moment. Foucault explained this in the context of the prison, which he states is a recent phenomenon. He argued that while the discipline and correctional system may seem more humane now than in the past, it isn't all that in reality. Rather, he argues, a standardized control of every aspect of the prisoner's life is a superior form of social control compared to the gruesome scaffold. It begs one to think: if one can create panoptic prisons, one can also create panoptic schools, military, media, economy and even a nation-state. Power exercised in panoptic society can impose conformity - with minimal or no use of coercion. Such an imposition, Foucault believed, was inherently undemocratic as it stifled individual thought through fear. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's apartment is analogous to Foucault's panoptic discipline. He can be watched by anyone and at any time through the 'telescreens,' but he has no way of knowing by whom or when - this forms an effective mode of social control in Oceania. Only when panopticism fails is the proverbial scaffold brought out as a last resort.

¹ 'Doublethink' is making people accept two opposing or contradictory ideas

Orwell wrote this book through his own experiences such as fighting in the Spanish Civil War. The book is heavily inspired by the real events and people of this era and his political satire becomes very clear in that context. As we steer our modern politics through economic nationalism, cults of political personality and government surveillance, the threat that Orwell warns us in his book is largely still relevant. The book also explores many other themes, which deserve an analytical lens, such as: the relationship between war and power, language and knowledge, class struggle, privacy and historical revisionism.