

Dissent as crime and Lunacy in Digital era: A Fresh Reading of Orwell's 1984

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Abstract

Human rights and human dignity have become a casualty in this digital era when the governments have assumed complete power over the right of privacy of citizens. The governments have been practicing double speak and thought policing. The new vistas of freedom opened by Information technology have been closed by the authoritarian governments. George Orwell's nightmare has become a reality and political dissent is branded as perversion, subjected to solitary confinement and hounded out of the country as shown in cases of Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden. This is 'the most unkindest cut' of so called 'Kind Capitalism' in the era of Globalization that ends human life itself with impunity, let alone human dignity. The article, "Dissent as crime and Lunacy in Digital era: A Fresh Reading of Orwell's 1984" argues that the freedom of expression and political dissent are depicted as criminal and madness. In fact, the real crime against people is committed by the ruling classes hand in glove with the corporate sector. Orwell's dystopia has become a fact and the present world order based on the principle "profit first and human next" must be resisted in the interests of freedom and equality

This is the era of revolution of information as well as disinformation. Contrary to the assertions and justifications by America which waged wars that devastated Iraq and Afghanistan, neither the chemical weapons were not found in Iraq nor Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. If "war is the continuation of politics by other means" as Clausewitz remarked, the neo-colonial wars of aggression by the USA are the continuation of market fundamentalist politics leading to the suppression of human rights. This is the real nature of the present order under the domination of the lone super power. The present paper examines

how democracy and human rights are discounted and destroyed under Globalization. It also argues that the freedom of expression and political dissent are depicted as criminal whereas the real crime against people is committed by the ruling classes in cahoots with the corporate sector. I also take up George Orwell's novel *1984* to make the point that Orwell's dystopia has become a fact which needs to be reckoned with and the present world economy based on "profit first and human next" is not conducive to the ideals of freedom and equality. Anna Chen finds in the novel a "focus on the totalitarianism of the Russian state and the slavishness of the left intelligentsia that allowed the myth of Soviet 'socialism' to take hold."¹

The Selective Democracy of Globalization

In his work, *Deterring democracy*, Chomsky argues that the elite of the Western world has always treated the common people as 'bewildered herd,' 'rabble' or 'virus' or 'the savages'. He also writes that modern democratic societies try to avoid transparency by means such as "classification of documents on the largely fraudulent national security, clandestine operations, and other measures to bar the rascal multitude from the political arena."²

Chomsky also writes as follows:

After the conquest of Iraq, evidence soon surfaced that Iraqi prisoners were being subjected to similar treatment ; gagged, bound, hooded, beaten " in the manner of the Afghans and other captives held at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba— treatment in itself questionable under international law," to put it mildly.³

In the present times we also find American NSA snooping on the mails of its citizens, using propaganda against Iraq over nonexistent nuclear weapons, encouraging mass *hysteria* against the Muslims leading to attacks on the bearded Sikhs mistakenly, tortures in Guantanamo bay.

Orwell's Prophetic Truth

Orwell in his famous novel *1984* depicts the nightmarish scenario of London under Socialism and satirizes the Stalinist Russia. It shows how the Big Brother who watches everything private in the lives of citizens, even their most intimate moments. In Oceania, the dystopia of Orwell, the rulers resort to double think and thought policing. The ministries of love and culture decide the fate of the hapless couples who fall in love. The rebellion of Winston Smith and Julia has failed because the eye of the Big brother is omnipresent and the protagonists are compelled to betray each other at the end of the novel. The three key slogans of party in Oceania are-- "*War is Peace,*" "*Freedom is Slavery,*" and "*Ignorance is Strength.*"

The very first line is striking: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." Smith is a party worker who works in The Ministry of Truth in regime

where the Big Brother watches everything. Thought Police are omnipresent and “you had to live –did live from the habit that became instinct- in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every moment scrutinized.” (5) Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, Miniplenty are short versions of The Ministries of Truth, peace, love and economic affairs respectively in Newspeak, the official language of Oceania. Smith has begun writing a diary that could attract capital punishment if found and he has to dodge the screen to escape the Big Brother. In the two-minute hate campaign in which he participates, he feels ambiguous. He hates mass hypnosis which turns people go into frenzy of hatred towards Emmanuel Goldstein(Trotsky), the ‘enemy of the State’ and makes them adore big brother as saviour.

Smith also feels afraid of a young girl, working in the fiction department being a spy and now sitting behind him in the hall. He sees hallucinations in which he would inflict violence, ravishment and death on her using rubber truncheon, arrows or through cutting her throat. He understands that he hated her since he could never sleep with that pretty and girl wearing the odious scarlet sash, aggressive symbol of chastity. He finds himself writing “Down With Big Brother” in his diary. Whether he went on with the dairy, or whether he didn’t go with it, made no difference. The Thought Police would get him just the same. He had committed-would still have committed, even if he had never set pen to paper-the essential crime that contained all others in itself. The consequences of thought crime were midnight arrests, missing of the ‘criminals’, the removal of one’s name and history from all records, and the obliteration of one’s existence. “You were abolished, annihilated; *vaporized* was the usual word.”(21)

George Orwell reveals how ideological orthodoxy is a product of unconsciousness and complete obedience. Orwell’s allegory is against the system of lies that brainwashes the people. In the novel, Winston Smith finds it unbearable that all —children, the young women, unthinking party men like Parsons, those who practise *duckquak* through voicing the propaganda and proletariat or ‘proles’ in Newspeak are conditioned into submission. Desire and sex for pleasure are criminal and the sexual act for pleasure is tantamount to rebellion in the regime. Smith wants to flout the virtue even for once despite threat of punishment of five years of forced labour. He also sees the pathetic plight of the veteran revolutionaries such as Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford who have been forced to confess to crimes of spying, embezzlement, murders of loyalists and intrigues against the leader. Later he gets hold of a piece of evidence from a paper in archives that proves that they were in New York on a specific day rather than in Eurasia as claimed by the State. The continuous doctoring of reality makes him feel whether he was a lunatic. Smith’s words in his diary, “I understand HOW: I do not understand WHY.”

In 2013, the story of Snowden is rather different. He has understood the mega betrayal by the megalomaniacal power in prying over the internet and e-mail or mobile

communication among people. Glenn Greenwald, a journalist of The Guardian refers to widely known aim of the U.S. surveillance system “to eliminate privacy globally.”⁴

The Hindu in its editorial, ‘The spying game’ published on Oct. 29, 2013 writes, “In its lack of hesitation in spying on its closest partners, America’s self-image as the leading democracy championing individual freedoms has been severely dented.”⁵

Orwell’s prophecy is that post-revolutionary London would be more horrible. Winston Smith’s effort in the novel has been to find out how life before revolution had been. One day while coming out of an antique shop on his unusual visits, he comes across Julia, the young woman whom he assumes as belonging to Thought police and indulges in murderous thoughts and turns apprehensive regarding his torturous death.

Invasion of Privacy and Trap by Thought Police

The second part of the novel refers to how Winston Smith and Julia have made their cautious moves to find out their feelings of mutual love unnoticed by telescreens everywhere and try to find a secure place for love. Julia shows more initiative in this regard. She throws away the scarlet sash of Anti-sex league on a bough and gives him a chocolate got from the black market. They listen to the melodious song of the thrush which evokes Winston’s feelings. He is delighted to know her promiscuity as a sign of rot in the party. Winston thinks, “But you couldn’t 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.” (133)

Julia, a girl of twenty-six years has also worked for some time in the pornosec, a subsection of the department of fiction. Winston has been amazed thinking how many people like her were there in the party rebelling against the party slyly. Julia’s concern is for the present and she has rejected the Party whenever it affected her life. She has grasped the inner meaning of Puritanism leading to war hysteria and leader-worship. Smith tells her about his failed marriage with orthodox and frigid Katharine.

Orwell elaborates analytically how the Thought Police in the forms of O’Brien and Mr. Charrington lure the couple—Winston Smith and Julia to become part of the secret organization and make them swear to do every kind of cruel act for the sake of better world in future even in the face of certain death. Winston gets a book indirectly from O’Brien, reads it and find how the slogan, ‘war is peace’ comes to stay.

Here it is relevant to understand that the elite class in the course of history have always tried to contain or exterminate the ignorant or the savages in colonies. In fact the elite in modern democracies seek legitimacy for their rule from people who have to again fight to wrest their rights and freedoms from the elite and their governments. Whoever ruptures the old order has to be tortured or silenced. Today the term ‘democracy’ is used to justify the naked aggression and obtain mass support through manufactured consent via print

and electronic media which have usually played the second fiddle to the governments of the day in times of war.

Orwell's portrayal of dystopia has now come true. The Soviet Union and its European communist allies have ceased to exist but the War machine of the USA has been functioning relentlessly. Its creation of war hysteria against Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, recent sabre-rattling against Iran and total support to Israel against the Palestinians and others in the Middle East, its surveillance over e-mails of the people in the name of combating terrorism, its manufacturing of consent through media and the undermining of the UNO all prove Koestler's prophecy in an ironical way.

Assault on Reason and Human Dignity

In the third part of the novel *1984*, we find how thought police use physical torture to make people toe the Party line. The horrific experience which Winston and Julia undergo in prison and the former's ambiguous feelings towards O'Brien and Big Brother are unravelled in the last pages of the novel. When O'Brien depicts the face of future as "a boot stamping on a human face" (280), Winston counters him saying that life will defeat them. Then O'Brien replays the record of Winston's voice during his initiation into movement of Brotherhood promising to do every crime conceivable for the sake of the cause of resistance and asks him to look at his grotesque shape in the mirror to damage Smith's sense of physical and moral self.

Isaac Asimov states that Orwell in his novel "was engaging in a private feud with Stalinism, rather than attempting to forecast the future. He did not have the science fictional knack of foreseeing a plausible future..."⁶

Lee Wengraph writes that Orwell's "writing was a product of his commitment to equality and an end to injustice" and "reflects his efforts to see a third path, an alternative to Soviet so-called socialism and the brutality of capitalism."⁷

Can the governments enjoy absolute power to silence the dissenters or activists for human rights? Is it fair to brand dissenters as criminals or foreign agents or lunatics? Does Globalization also mean an assault on democracy and human rights? Douglas Kellner finds that the vision of Huxley and Marcuse better than Orwell's nightmarish vision. He writes that "Orwell's emphasis on force and state terror must be supplemented by Marcuse's and Huxley's emphasis on manipulation and new forms of social control."⁸

In spite of Orwell's dystopian vision which causes alarm, history shows that common people cherish the values of freedom, equality and life with dignity but not repression as proven by the collapse of the Berlin wall, the former communist regimes, apartheid in South

Africa and the rule of Mubarak in Egypt recently. When India fought against the British imperialism, the former Soviet Union inspired and stood by India before and after independence and during the cold war. It is true that Marxist revolution has led to the strengthening of bureaucracy, the suppression of human rights and arts internally in post-revolutionary societies but it hardly acquits global capitalism from its predatory role in the old and new colonies. All those Indians who cherish the values of freedom and equality in India would admit that economic equality is an imperative in attaining social justice as championed by Karl Marx and Ambedkar. A happy combination of insights from these two theorists can usher in a new India that respects freedom as well as equality.

Notes

¹ Anna Chen, "Opinions: Essays: George Orwell a Literary Trotskyist?" <http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/opinion/essays/chen.html>

² Chomsky, Noam. *Deterring Democracy*. London: Penguin Books, 2006. P.369.

³ Chomsky, Noam. *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest For Global Dominance*. London: Penguin Books, 2004. P.26-27.

⁴ 'Not surprising India has become an important surveillance target', *The Hindu*, September 23, 2013.

⁵ editorial, 'The spying game' *The Hindu*, Oct.29,2013.

⁶ Isaac Asimov, "Review of 1984." <http://www.newworker.org/ncptrory/1984.htm>

⁷ Lee Wengraf, "The Orwell we never knew", *International Socialist Review* Issue 32, November–December 2003.

⁸ Douglas Kellner, "From 1984 to One-Dimensional Man: Critical Reflections on Orwell and Marcuse." <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell13.htm>

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