

## **Crime as a theme in Orwell's *1984* and its Parallels in the Modern World**

**Justin Philip Cherian**

M.A, B.Ed, NET  
Munduchira House  
Pulincunnoo P.O.  
Alappuzha district  
Kerala

### **Abstract**

The paper tries to explore the theme of crime in Orwell's dystopian novel 1984. The definition of crime is subverted by Big Brother and his party who are in control of Oceania. Crime is no longer something that can be committed by institutions. It is only individuals who are capable of crime. In the country of Oceania, speaking one's mind amounts to crime. Freedom of expression and criticizing the government etc are violation for which you can be prosecuted by the state. The protagonist of the novel Winston is one such individual. He is arrested and tortured by the government for trying to stop the tyranny of the party. The logic in Oceania is so skewed that people are made to believe that War is Peace. Another principle that the rulers of Oceania believe in is that Slavery is Freedom. By inverting the basic truths of human life, normal activities of the citizens are also deemed crimes in Oceania.

**Keywords:** Crime, Orwell, Oceania, Big Brother, 1984, Dystopia

The paper makes an analysis of the theme of crime depicted in the dystopian classic 1984 written by George Orwell. It can be seen that the book discusses the plight of a man named Winston who finds himself trapped in the country of Oceania ruled by 'Big Brother'. Winston is convicted as a criminal who conspired against the government and punished severely until he admits his mistake and decides to go along with the policies of the government. The book overturns and puts to question our basic notions about crime and its definition in the modern world. The horrifying realization is that only individuals are capable of crime and institutions as such are incapable of doing anything that can be termed as crime. The Oceania of Orwell's *1984* is a world under scrutiny and surveillance just like the offices and educational institutions of ours where citizens and individuals are watched over by Big brothers and sisters.

A close analysis of the country of Oceania is important to know what amounts to crime there. Orwell talks about the 'two minute hate' which is a practice in Oceania. The citizens of Oceania are by law required to hate a man named Goldstein and publically display it as a sign of

patriotism. In *1984*, Orwell says, “Goldstein was the primal traitor, the earliest defiler of the Party’s purity. All subsequent crimes against the Party, all treacheries, acts of sabotage, heresies, deviations, sprang directly out of his teaching” (6). Anyone who does not take part in the ‘two minute hate’ will be considered a traitor and branded as a follower of Goldstein. However when we look at what Goldstein is asking for we understand the problem with the country of Oceania. “He was advocating freedom of speech, freedom of the Press, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, he was crying hysterically that the revolution had been betrayed” (7). Thus in the country of Oceania demanding basic human rights amounts to treachery and is considered a heinous crime. Moreover the rulers should never be criticized. “He was abusing Big Brother, he was denouncing the dictatorship of the Party” (7).

It doesn’t take much time for us to see that the so called Indian democracy is not very far from the tyrannical Oceania. The BBC wrote on 19/11/2012, “Police in India have arrested a woman they say criticised on Facebook the shutdown of the city of Mumbai after the death of politician Bal Thackeray” (“India arrests over Facebook post criticising Mumbai shutdown”). The same article also shared similar incidents in other parts of the country. “In recent months, police have arrested a number of people in cases which are being seen as a test of India’s commitment to freedom of speech” (BBC). The ‘criminals’ included people who criticized ministers, their sons and even cartoonists who criticized corruption. To a certain extent Orwell’s *1984* was a fair warning to countries all around the world.

Yet another interesting factor is that we live in a world where compulsory nationalism has become a norm. Rulers have already forgotten the fact that excessive nationalism was one of the reasons behind the two world wars. In *1984* this particular aspect is very evident. It is not only a country where criticizing the government is a crime, but also the citizens are required by law to hate the enemies of the state. This is quite evident from the two minute hate that the citizens of Oceania observe on a daily basis. A fine example of forcing compulsory nationalism down people’s throat would be the Supreme Court ruling that film theatres should play the national anthem before every screening. On 30/11/2016, Krishnadas Rajagopal wrote in the Hindu, “The Supreme Court ordered all cinema halls across the country to play the national anthem before the screening of films and that all present must “stand up in respect” till the anthem ended. It said the practice would instill a feeling within one a sense of committed patriotism and nationalism.” At the same time it is important to note what the author of the national anthem had to say about nationhood itself. In his essay, “Nationalism in India”, Tagore wrote about nations, “The gigantic organizations for hurting others and warding off their blows, for making money by dragging others back, will not help us. On the contrary, by their crushing weight, their enormous cost and their deadening effect upon the living humanity they will seriously impede our freedom in the larger life of a higher civilization”.

In *1984*, the very definition of crime is inverted at an institutional level. Take for example the slogans of the ruling party engraved on the Ministry of Truth. Two of them say that War is Peace and Slavery is Freedom. While we know that these are not true at all, in Oceania, these are accepted facts which the citizens have to believe. They have no choice but to believe in these

institutionalized truths. By inverting the basic truths about human knowledge the rulers find ways to make very normal activities look like criminal activities. If we apply these slogans to the modern world we can say that it is true to a certain extent. The modern citizenry are told by their rulers that wars are being fought for peace. Now this slogan has been said for so long that people tend to believe that peace is not possible at all without wars. Similarly in the case of freedom, citizens living in democratic countries are very often denied of their basic rights. But these people more often than not, tend to believe that it is better to remain slaves and obey everything rather than speak out against the all powerful governments and lose their life or livelihood. So for the modern man the freedom to accept slavery as a way of life is the most comforting element in democracy.

When we look at the text of *1984*, we can see that these paradoxes run on a very consistent basis. For example, Orwell's description of the Ministry of Love runs like this, "It was a place impossible to enter except on official business, and then only by penetrating through a maze of barbed-wire entanglements, steel doors, and hidden machine-gun nests. Even the streets leading up to its outer barriers were roamed by gorilla-faced guards in black uniforms, armed with jointed truncheons" (3). This complete reversal of the traditional definitions and meanings of all too familiar words might look outlandish on the outside but in the modern world reality is what Orwell foresaw years ago. In Oceania, the Ministry of Love is in charge of keeping law and order. And the way it is done in many parts of our own country will give us a better idea why Orwell was right to describe it in the manner he did it.

In *1984*, Orwell also talks about novel-writing machines. Novels were created in the fiction department of the government. Creativity was no longer needed in these places and writers quite naturally had no place in the country. It is probably a development of the modern practice of exiling writers for their creative works. In our own country we have the much more definitive practice of murdering people who write what we do not want to hear. On 20/8/2013, Amruta Byatnal wrote in the Hindu, "Anti-superstition activist and Maharashtra's most vocal rationalist Dr. Narendra Dabholkar (65) was shot dead by two youth on a motorcycle on the Omkareshwar bridge near Pune's Shanivar Peth area." He was just one of many intellectuals and writers who were murdered in India in the recent years in India. With the amount of encouragement such extremists are getting in this country we could soon be talking about novel-writing machines in this country.

Another important feature of the country of Oceania is the fact that history is changeable. History can be and is changed without much effort in the country of Oceania. This particular power exercised by the government is not questioned by the people at all. And the mutability helps the government to validate any wrong decision that it is taking. Although such forgery cannot be done very easily in the modern world, it is not something very alien to us. We have witnessed many powerful structures taking steps to ensure that knowledge about certain events do not reach the public. At times it is done by controlling the media using the power of money or by restricting the availability of books containing such information. It is even possible for fossil fuel giants like the Koch brothers to buy scientists and make them say that something as evident as

global warming is a hoax. In the modern world money and political power can change any truth into fiction in no time.

Another aspect of crime dealt with in *1984* is that of surveillance. It is not dealt with as a crime even in the modern world. But the encroachment into the personal space should be considered as a crime. Orwell describes Oceania as a place where there is extreme surveillance. In *1984* we read, “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston’s own” (1). We understand that the citizens of Oceania have no personal life as they are constantly watched by a telescreen which has the power to know what each person is doing and also tell them what to do and what not to do. “The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard” (2).

Our notions about what is right and what is wrong is no longer under our control and is almost always decided by people who claim that they have the authority to do so. We also live in a country where public display of nationalism has become the order of the day. It has become a punishable offence not to do so. It is in this context that we need to look very closely at the text of Orwell’s *1984* written in 1949 which talks about a country where such a practice was very normal. Winston like many of us today feels suffocated with this jingoistic display of nationalism on a scheduled basis and ends up in prison for his attempts to overthrow the Big Brother. A reading of the text analyzing the different aspects of crime and how crime becomes yet another constructed reality in the modern world will yield rich dividends for us readers. Orwell’s Oceania is a country where history can be created and destroyed with utmost efficiency and terrifying ease. The paper also tried to look at the modern society and how it shows some of the qualities of Orwell’s Oceania including an increased desire for war with other countries. War after all, as we all know, is not considered a crime as it is institutional, whereas a fight with your neighbour is enough to land you in jail. The definition and scope of crime in the modern world is so skewed that the worst criminals end up judging others and find themselves comfortable in the highest offices in some of the most powerful countries in the world.

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