

The Catharsis of Science Fiction: A re-reading of George Orwell's 1984 from Contemporary Psycho-Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

In this astonishing era of Nano technology and Artificial Intelligence, Science Fiction appears to be an entity that enjoys extensive popular demand irrespective of the medium it is presented in. Movies, comics and novels frequently employ science fiction and are quite successful with their reception by the populace. By definition itself, science fiction tends to narrate a time that is expected to take place in the distant future. George Orwell's one of the most discussed work, 'Nineteen Eighty Four' was published in the year 1949 and the plot of the work is set on 1984. This paper explores into the characters and society presented in the work and how, after more than 70 years of its publication, it can still be relatable to the complex psycho-social structure of today's society. Readers who are way ahead of its time can surprisingly find this work close to their social life. This opens the possibility of science fiction to invoke pity and fear in the mind of the readers and there by manifest Catharsis. The paper also enquires into the capabilities of science fiction as a genre to invoke catharsis.

Key Words: George Orwell, 1984, Science Fiction, Psycho-Sociology, Modern era

Science fiction emerges as a popular thematic dimension of various media and entertainment modes such as films, cartoon, novel, comics, video games, etc. Understanding some science fiction works can be quite tricky as they rely too much on science, whereas some works only employ fundamental science to create an intriguing plot. Science fiction has a wide range of reception as kids to people of every age show keen interest in it. Apart from fiction in its literal sense, science fiction entertains the imaginative skills of the spectator or reader by constantly throwing open ended questions and appealing doubts. The exact definition of science fiction is a matter of debate, and so is its origin. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a popular reference text on science fiction, compiles various definitions of science fiction in an attempt to derive an empirical explanation of what makes a work science fiction. The elaborate discussion which follows on defining science fiction pin points on Darko Ronald Suvin's definition of science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment". Accordingly, the estrangement and cognition work together to keep the readers at a distance from their empirical environment and yet not too far. Thus events unravelled through science fiction appeal to the readers as unreal and very likely to happen at

the same time. It is mainly to achieve this 'make believe' impact that most of the science fiction works rely on a time frame that is away from the present. While the imaginative framework dangles between the possibility and probability of a given scientific event, it also intervenes into the psyche of its characters and their sociological advancements. But surprisingly, certain works achieve the title of science fiction without elaborating on a future time or technological advancement. Moreover, it can be philosophical as well.

Evidently, science fiction does not have a homogenous nature but more of a fluid vitality to manifest itself in myriad forms. Orwell's *1984* is often referred to as a social science fiction for its brilliant study of the internal conflicts of the characters and social relationships. The plot of *1984* revolves around the development and tragedy of the relationship between Winston Smith and Julia. The details of Winston's dull and gloomy life are elaborated at the beginning of the novel. He leads a solitary life at a time in which numerous restrictions hold back the whole idea of freedom from the individual. Julia works at the same office as that of Winston. They meet and fall in love, as natural as it can be. The mannerism of these two characters, softness of their speech and tender dialogues help bring a reader closer to the reality of social life, the autocratic social system appears to be exaggerated, mystifying and scary.

Orwell imagines human relationships to be unaltered even in the strangest of times but the secrecy and openness of relationships are brought into question. As imagined in the novel, an emotional mind is improper and so is expected to live under constant fear of doubt by the authority or being trapped by the thought monitoring system. Approaching this social schema from today's perspective, one might notice that every individual is being monitored either by their own automated lifestyle accessories such as a smartphone or by a lurking hacker, if you are in possession of sensitive information. Winston has one such fear once he starts to write a diary. Even though seemingly an introvert, Winston is always ready to lend a helping hand to his neighbours and he is also kind towards Mrs. Parsons who lives a miserable life she leads. Winston is portrayed as a person who is neat with his work, but has no personal interest in the job. The interaction between Winston and his co-workers are cold, except for one of his close friend whom he loses without a trace.

Orwell has spent excessive effort to detail a vivid cross section of the society in this fictional world. As the novel progresses, it offers a space to fit in for any reader from any given point of time, a space where the activities within it can be deduced to the enactment of a moment in life that the reader might have gone through. Perhaps this was intentional, expecting to soft-land the reader into the obnoxious social affairs of 'Oceania'. None of the human values are celebrated inside the society of Oceania but the minds of its subjects are aggravated by the constant strain of war. *1984* gradually builds up a tension of being caught doing something wrong or a war about to begin. So far, the aforementioned specialities does not make *1984* a science fiction, although they could sufficiently comprise a social fiction. It is but the objects and vision that marks it as a proper science fiction. A passionate reader of science fiction generally looks forward to meeting such strange and futuristic ideas becoming an object, and Orwell satisfies it.

Reading into science fiction literature can be considered as a search for vision as well. But it does not question how far the anticipations of the author can be brought to reality, rather it tries to delineate on the outreach of human potentials and its immense possibilities either in a positive or dystopian manner. However, most of the science fiction works rely on displaying a dystopian ambience, where it is easy to bring forth the questions regarding the

impending doom of humanity. Orwell does so, by elaborating on the extremely autocratic governance of Oceania. Also, the technology of the future is exhibited as horrifying objects that not only interferes with the physical reality but also manipulates the human psyche.

Despite the question of whether it had become a reality even after decades of its anticipated arrival, a reader from the present can relate to such imagination and might feel terrified of how such a possibility cannot be disqualified. For instance, He portrays a society whose members are mentally entrapped to obey and to praise. Into this tightly ruled society, Orwell introduces the idea of 'Telescreen'. The term was probably coined after Television that was an emerging influence during the time when the novel was written. The telescreen can show audio visual content like a television but the telescreen is also able to see and transfer that data to a remote monitoring centre supposedly observed by the government. Nowadays we have highly advanced televisions equipped with cameras that can stream whatever that is in front of them to a remote location. When telescreen restricted individual freedom and controlled human activity, these modern day televisions simulate a virtual space where human relationships are seemingly encouraged and the barrier of physical distance overthrown. But the lesser known fact is that these modern day televising systems commodify human relationships, invoke a false feeling of togetherness and by regular use, can turn its users into slaves. A reader from today easily identifies the telescreen with a television, and may be perplexed by the idea of the telescreen becoming a reality through televisions.

Apart from televisions, Artificial intelligence interferes with the day to day life of the modern man. It begins from helping you remember important tasks of the day to finding a suitable life partner. About 70 years ago, Orwell imagines a device that instructs human subjects, watches them, controls them, and enslaves them. Today, we have developed interactive response systems such as 'Alexa', 'Siri' and "Google Go" which will listen to us, talk to us, observe us without our knowledge and feed us with information chosen and provided by some corporate entity. In essence, a reader from the year 2020 can relate to the systems presented in *Nineteen Eighty Four* in numerous ways.

Despite the dystopian technology and ambience of the novel, there is an emotional space described by the author. Winston only has dark memories about his parents and family. He lost his mother and sister at a young age, and he has no idea whether his wife is alive or not. Instances such as Winston's dream about his mother and his recollection of moments with his only sibling, inadvertently forces the reader to sympathise with Winston. For those who already identified themselves with Winston the lonely, gloomy, frustrated man, the memories and grotesque experience that Winston goes through acts as a catalyst to invoke pity. It is important for science fiction to elucidate upon how the characters connect physically and mentally with their surrounding reality. Winston and Julia, compared to the other characters maintain a more analytical perspective towards their experiences, but it appears for the other characters as being in a vulnerable position, easier to be manipulated.

(Sociological aspect) We have always seen the society resorting to technology if it is available even to substitute the most menial tasks of daily life. Science fiction literatures exploit this common human feature to render the fact that how inseparable we are from technology. In *1984*, Orwell displays examples on how children are handled and guided to the wrong interpretation of the world in the society of Oceania. For the parents of today, keeping a child busy is an easy task, thanks to smartphones and television. For every hardship, they seek visual guidance from 'Youtube' which appears to be more handy than the

experience of the grandparents. The character of Mrs.Parsons is a specimen that exhibits the worst picture of what parentage can do to a woman. She is drained of all the energy, looks way more aged than she really is, and she is often caught up between her broken dreams and her immediate surroundings. The children hardly listen to her, but on the contrary they are intensely obedient to the 'Big Brother' or the party. The parents of today are surprisingly ignorant to the fact that their children are being controlled by a device. Even as they grow up, online interactions only help decrease the value of face to face human interaction. It can be assumed from the novel that Mrs.Parson's children are regularly fed by the violence, aggression and nationalism from the 'Telescreen'. The children are sad because they could not see the public hanging, and they are extensively aggressive with their regard to anything that is against the 'Big Brother' or the party. The invisible role of Telescreen here may be examined in parallel to the impact of television in children. Thomas Drabman, in his research on this matter infers that favourable attitudes toward aggression have been found to be correlated with heavy television viewing. Even after it has become an established fact, the impact of television and the regulation of its contents continues to be unaffected. The question remains, how far are the children of Mrs.Parson from becoming a reality? When science fiction literatures often dwell on a time frame set in the far future, we have to take it into consideration that the vision comes from a mind that draws inspiration from the present.

The post war era could have deeply influenced Orwell as it did to the whole world. The world, shaken by the terror of war and decline of the value of human life, probably helped the author to design a social structure that contains all the hopelessness of the post war era.

The sketch of social interactions portrayed in 1984 is complex and layered. Subjects of the society are divided into different groups with an unjust measure decided by the party. Orwell introduces the term 'Proles' to suggest the proletariat of the society. The proles lead a miserable life, and the government are inconsiderate toward them. Winston believes that if ever, there is going to be a revolution, it will be from the proles. However, Winston cannot interfere directly with the affairs of the proles since he is being watched. Winston tries talking to an old man in the pub for information on how the society used to be before the autocracy of the party took hold of it. Interaction within the members of the party always concerned either boasting off the merits of the party or hatred toward the anti-nationals. Winston's relationship with Julia stands apart in this regard because they could talk to each other about their hatred to the party without the fear of being betrayed. The strange nature and innocence of their love is one key factor which makes the work a 'social' science fiction. However, towards the end, we are presented with a Winston who betrays Julia when he encounters one of the greatest fears of his life. We are expected to believe that Julia must have done the same to Winston. When Winston is imprisoned for his crimes, the prison cells incorporate members from various cross section of the London society of 1984 and the slightest act of kindness and freedom are rudely oppressed by the police. Even when the inmates of the cell begin to sympathise with each other, fear and authority is used against them to dissipate whatever bonding they have for each other. The interaction between the authority and its subjects are vividly portrayed in the novel and yet the 'Big Brother' never comes face to face with his subjects. All that the subjects know is that they are being watched, protected and administered by someone at someplace. The Ministry in which Winston works is only a mechanism operated by the party. Even without any ministry, the party could control the mind-set of its subjects and they always seem to accept commands from the Big Brother.

In the novel, Orwell employs his imaginative skill over technological advancements that deal with communication and State Apparatuses. There is minimal difference between today's high-tech communication systems and the governmental regulatory systems. At one hand, anything and everything regarding an individual is collected on a single platform and encrypted into codes. This is an act necessitated by most of the governments on the pretext of the simplification of procedures. On the other hand, centralising this data puts every individual in a vulnerable position where the person can be manipulated by those who possess the 'Code'.

A recent study on changing social landscapes conducted by *Garold Stasser, BetDietz-Uhler, and Zachary Birchmeier* elaborates on the impacts of electronic interaction, anonymity and virtual worlds. They claim communicative utility to be a manipulative power over the behavioural patterns of an individual ("A person may watch a sports event not because she is interested in the event itself but because she anticipates discussing it with friends the next day"). Thus, in this digital world, it is not surprising to realise that we all have a 'Big Brother' who instructs us every now and then.

Orwell writes about the exercise of social control in two of his other works as well, *The Animal Farm* and *Burmese Days*. Both of these works quite brilliantly reflect upon the psycho social condition of the world at that time. In this respect, *1984* differs from the two by several factors such as the extremity of key ideas and the strange and mysterious imagery. The second half of the 20th century lived mostly under the fear of an outbreak of the third world war. However, the tension was eased with the intervention of various international pacts, treaties and organizations. But the possibility of another world war cannot be overlooked. It can also be interpreted that the populace has become too busy to think about another war since the revolution of information technology has multiplied the speed of the spreading of data. We are at a time where there is too much going on to talk about. It enhanced international cooperation and encouraged timely interference in critical internal affairs of the countries by peace organizations. Yet, violence and fascism has always found its way into the deepest regions of society. Parallel to the real physical world, there is a virtual world where human individuals are the digital natives. Influencing forces dwell in this area, and access the young minds easily. The individuals are forced into an identity crisis, and they gradually lose a sense of belonging to the real world. It is mainly from this perspective that a re-reading of *1984* is conducted. The study can be extended to the genre of science fiction as a whole. Classic fictional works of Isaac Asimov and HG Wells offer great reference to present the mental climate of the modern world, and they turn out to be greatly relatable for their use of technological innovations.

Orwell's *1984* offers a study of individuality and emotions as well as being a proper science fiction thriller. The novel concludes as Winston and Julia are transformed into two ordinary obedient subjects of the party, moreover, their individuality is shattered and can no longer fall in love. They meet again after their prison sentence; "As they walked back across the gate, she looked directly at him for the first time. It was only a momentary glance, full of contempt and dislike. He wondered whether it was a dislike that came purely out of the past or whether it was inspired also by his bloated face and the water that the wind kept squeezing from his eyes". What happens to the couples here is more tragic than death or separation. The emotions and sympathy of the reader are heightened at this point. The dynamics of emotional scenarios in *1984* is excellent and similar in design to classic tragedies. Analysing the development of emotional intensity in the novel, it can be seen that the dull life of Winston is

the minimal starting point and the end of the affairs between Winston and Julia is the peak. The gravity of emotions steadily increases with each page of the work. The same pattern is followed by classic works of tragedy, where usually a noble character confronts a life threatening problem at the prime of his life. The various ways by which how a reader can relate his/her life to the life in *1984* is explained previously. The psychological aspects as well as the sociological specialities of modern day life have been analysed to understand the prowess of the theme dwelt in *1984*. Towards the end of the novel, the readers are not presented with a ray of hope but rather a pessimistic air of failure and disbelief which consequently invokes pity. Winston and Julia could not keep the promise of love. The strange victory of O'Brien, a prime member of the party, ascertains how helpless an individual is in front of such a dystopian system of governance.

Numerous technologies are being put to use in the daily life of an average individual today. Most of them are part of their thought, personality and behavioural patterns. Oddly enough, the majority are clearly aware of how influential these technologies can be in one's life and still, cannot separate them from one's daily life. It turns out to be scarier, when the government makes use of these inseparable technological advancements as a state apparatus of control. The life of Winston then, acts as a preview about the future of each reader of the present. In the proper sense of *Katharsis* as explained by Aristotle, Nineteen Eighty Four succeeds to be a tragedy which, through pity and fear effects a purgation of such emotions. London did not become what Orwell in *1984*, nevertheless, reading the work from newer perspective make us understand that the title of the work is just a number and most of that which anticipated by this intricate work of art has already become a reality. The birth of Oceania is not too far away.

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