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'DOUBLETHINK' AND IDEOLOGY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984

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ABSTRACT

Dystopian novels generally take up an idea or event which, by general agreement at a particular time may lead towards a negative development. The novels, in their distinctive imaginary world, develop that idea or event in a way so as to foretell what these can lead up to. 1984, a dystopian novel by George Orwell, takes up the case of Communist Revolution in the Soviet Union, especially the development it reached in the Stalin era. Among many key concepts the novel introduces the concept of 'doublethink'. Which, in simple words, means holding two contradictory opinions at the same time with equal emphasis. In the course of the novel the word attempts to unravel the complexity that involves the understanding of Marx's interpretation of 'ideology' as false consciousness. The concept's slightly non-Marxist representation in the novel raises it above Foucault's criticism of Marx's idea. Here I will attempt to explore how the concept of 'doublethink' is represented in the novel and how it evades Foucault's criticism.

Keywords: Ideology, Foucault, Marx, 1984

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1984 by George Orwell is a seminal dystopian text which attempts to foretell how far the totalitarian extremities can lead a society up to. The novel takes the readers to a disconsolate future year of 1984 where the late dominant capitalist society has been overthrown by a revolutionary power which shares much of the characteristics of the communist regime in USSR especially the Stalin era. 'BIG BROTHER', with his paradoxical omnipresent virtual presence, about whose existence there is considerable doubt, leads the regime as a sole powerful tyrant. The image of 'BIG BROTHER' that Winston Smith encounters, evokes in us the image of Stalin-

"The black moustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own."(Orwell, 744)

In that regime individual has been reduced to nothing and individual liberty has been sacrificed for the party and the 'intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler'. Party is given supreme importance. Everything is sacrificed for the party. Individuality and individual existence is looked at with extreme hostility and derision-

"There was a word for it in Newspeak: *ownlife*, it was called, meaning individualism and eccentricity."(Orwell, 791)

The postmodern idea that language construes reality is manifested in the novel with the regime's attempt to introduce a new language which will make impossible any subversive thought. In order to achieve this end language is stripped of all its ambiguities and grammatical complexities and there is considerable inclusion and deletion of words and hence meanings. What then ensues is 'Newspeak', a language which has done away with most of the irrelevant synonyms, and such words like 'science' which is no longer relevant. This 'Newspeak' introduces some new words, like 'doublethink', 'thought crime' etc., which marks the general intellectual and social atmosphere of the time.

'Doublethink' is one of the 'sacred principles' of the party of INGSOC. This is the crucial device which helps the party control people's memory. The concept speaks of holding two contradictory opinions and believing in these two with equal emphasis. One, the 'real' which owing to its reality the double thinker cannot help believing; and the other, contrary to the 'real', which the double thinker, as a representative of the dominant ideology, propagates. The belief in 'doublethink' entails a never-ending overarching recession which involves the very belief in it, to the extent that one will have to delete from one's memory that one is a double thinker. In the novel the protagonist Winston Smith works as a rectifier in the 'Ministry of Truth' whose business is historical revisionism, that is to change the past information, encoded in the newspapers, in order to fit the past or history to the dominant ideology of the present. He performs his job by erasing the names and events which may falsify the Party and replaces them with the piece of information which will glorify the Party and will eventually sustain its power. He writes the article anew and throws the old one containing records of 'real' events to the 'memory hole' which burns it and hence erases a truth which might have contested the authenticity of the party-line truth.

It "does not reflect pre-existing entities and orders but brings into being the perceptions and oppositions of which it speaks"(Abrams, 190). This exposes the process of knowledge construction in a society which in turn will define what will be accounted to be truth or false and what will be accounted to be natural as opposed to deviant. In the novel there are two parallel realities- first, the previous records of the events which exist in the mind of those people who remember them; and the second, the official party line reality which the party generates in order to sustain its power. A double thinker is aware about this parallel reality, knows that the reality the party is propagating is actually false, but erases the records of the original events and tries to establish the party line reality to be the truth. The original events will take the shape of just a memory and sometimes a nightmare- it is sometimes very dangerous to be true when the party is false. As there remains no record of the events which will challenge the authenticity of the party line reality, gradually over the time people will cease to believe in the original events, and the party line reality will be the accepted version of reality.

The fact that there will come into being a reality which is false seems to go in line with classical Marxist view that ideology is a 'false consciousness'. The term 'false consciousness' was used for the first time by Engels in a letter to Franz Mehring dated 14th July 1893-

"Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all." (Marx Engels Correspondence, 586)

The passage argues about two consciousnesses- one is the true and another is the false one. The consciousness that a particular individual thinks gives shape to his/her actions is a false one. The other one which works underhand is the actual moulder of events. This particular combination of these two, where one seems to act on individual's acts and intentions and while the other acts in reality, constitute an ideology. For Engels, as he further elaborates the matter, the falseness occurs because the so-called thinker does not have exposure to the real events and is immersed in thought-

"Because it is a process of thought that derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without

examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought..."(Marx Engels Correspondence, 586-7)

Our prior perception and formulation of opinion about events impede our attempt to reach the reality and tell the truth. In the novel, too, we can observe that there is an express attempt to rectify the data which is the manifestation of reality. Thus here the creation of similar distance from reality is observed which generates false knowledge. The solution to this is what we may call de-ideologization which can be achieved with the thinker's active participation in the real events. In other words the thinker must leave his/her closed chamber of thought and speculation and must gain some practical knowledge of the events. In their *The German Ideology*, while criticizing the fundamental basis of German ideological philosophy, Marx and Engels comment-

"In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process."(Marx Engels, 11)

We can always strive to unveil the reality but, in fact, our each attempt to reach the reality is informed and hence thwarted by whatever we have learned so far. We can never reach the ideal condition of "epoche" or the suspension of our knowledge and beliefs and cannot get ourselves out of the web of knowledge we have acquired so far. Thus the above "advice involves us in the potential paradox, of course, that it assumes that 'we' see 'real, active men' and not just what we 'say, imagine [or] conceive': everyone else is in the grip of ideology but us."(Hawthorn, 164)Michel Foucault attacks this very self-effacing nature of the notion, which forms the cornerstone of the concept of ideology. Foucault comments while voicing his problem in using the term 'ideology'-

"...whether one wants it to be or not, it is always in virtual opposition to something like the truth." (Foucault, 1979:36)

For Marx and Engels ideology is 'false consciousness'. It is also implied that this ideology is all-embracing. Paradoxically, any criticism against this ideology necessitates a position outside the ambit of ideology, which ideology because of its all-embracing nature, rejects.

In the novel the concept of 'doublethink' seems to raise the Marxist idea of ideology as a 'false consciousness' above the Foucauldian doubt of self-effacement. As mentioned earlier, 'doublethink' introduces two contrasting realities. If we consider the party-line reality to be the 'false' one as against the reality they are trying to 'vaporize', we have here in the novel, two contrasting realities. Foucault's concern is with the impossibility of a ground outside the play of ideology or a position of truth where the critic can overcome the influence of the 'false consciousness' and from where he/she can claim to perceive the truth. Here in the novel, Winston stands on the ground from where he can recognise both of the beliefs. Winston's case brings to the foreground another aspect of the working of the 'ideology'. Thus in his mind lurks the revolutionary thought of revolting against the party. That is, the ideology does not work in such a mystic and surreptitious way that it escapes the notice of the 'thinker'. But unlike Engels' and Althusser's perception of reality where it was stressed that ideology works unconsciously, where the thinkers upon whom this works are unaware about its underhand workings, here in the novel the rectifiers like Winston, who can be equated with the 'thinkers', are aware about the parallel reality. Except for a small coterie of individuals, public in general or the 'proles' are ignorant of this dual reality.

It is because Winston is able to overcome the reality that the party thrusts upon him he can believe-
"If there is hope... it lies in the proles." (Orwell, 783)

This brings us home to a peculiar situation where it is the people wielding power are entrapped in the very power structure. The power structure does not allow them to act as they choose. The individuals belonging to the party are so much alienated that they are strangers to one another. Although, the exclusion of the 'proles' from the privileged position snatches from them the agency or volition which is the prime requirement of

bringing about a revolution, Winston has hope in the 'proles'. This is because of their brute majority and of the fact that they are not strangers to one another as the Party members are. The fact which is to be considered here is that Winston, a party member, can deconstruct and probe into the party policy and hence can realize its nefarious intention.

Thus the concept of 'doublethink' hints at the possibility that cuts across the thinking of Marx-Engels and Foucault. Marx and Engels claim that ideology is 'false consciousness'. Even Althusser in his *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* hints at the same notion through his first thesis in the essay-

"Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."
(Rivkin and Ryan 693)

Foucault rejects the interpretation of ideology as a 'false consciousness' on the ground that this interpretation is inherently self-contradictory. Self-contradictory because, the all-embracing nature of ideology does not leave any truth ground for the critic, hence all criticism turns out to be futile exercise of falsehood. The concept of 'doublethink' talks about two parallel reality or consciousness, one is true and the other is false. Thus it demonstrates the presence of the so-called 'false consciousness' and still it does not fall in the Foucauldian trap of self-contradiction. This happens only because it is not fully Marxist in tone as it does not adhere to the Marxist notion that ideology works unconsciously. Here the protagonist Winston Smith is not only fully conscious about both the realities but also he has some fascination about the past that he, as a rectifier deletes.

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