

From Reading to Awakening: Cultivating Critical Consciousness Through Literature, A Study of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four

Abdul Hamid Sheikh¹, Rituparna Das²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Govt. Model Degree College, Baghbar

Abstract:

This paper explores the transformative role of literature in cultivating critical consciousness, focusing particularly on George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Orwell's dystopian vision provides a powerful framework for interrogating mechanisms of control, including pervasive surveillance, manipulation of language, distortion of truth, and the systematic suppression of individuality. These narrative strategies are not confined to the Cold War era in which the novel was conceived, rather, they resonate across boundaries, offering a critical lens for examining the dynamics of contemporary societies marked by digital surveillance, political disinformation, and authoritarian governance. Through a close reading of Orwell's text, the study underscores how the novel functions as a cultural critique that exposes the fragility of democratic values when subjected to manipulation by hegemonic powers. At this juncture, the paper draws upon Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy to argue that literature operates not merely as a mirror of social realities but as a transformative medium for awakening readers to hidden structures of domination. Freire's notion of critical consciousness emphasizes the process of learning to "read the world" critically, thereby enabling individuals to recognize and challenge oppressive forces. In this framework, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* emerges as more than a literary classic; it becomes a pedagogical tool that cultivates critical literacy, dialogue, and resistance. By foregrounding the intersections of Orwell's narrative with Freirean pedagogy, the study demonstrates how literature equips individuals with intellectual and ethical resources to resist manipulation, question entrenched ideologies, and reaffirm democratic practices. Literature, when taught through dialogic and reflective approaches, fosters not only aesthetic appreciation but also active engagement with pressing social and political concerns.

Keywords: critical consciousness, dystopian fiction, surveillance, manipulation, critical pedagogy.

Introduction: Critical consciousness, a term made famous by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, is essentially the capacity to see and challenge social, political, and economic injustices. It's about seeing the inequities that are around us and developing the courage, intellectual and moral, to question them. It isn't merely about facts, it is about critically thinking about how power operates and dreaming up alternative ways that the world might be. At its core, critical consciousness is a matter of agency, the assumption that we can actually make the world different rather than merely go along with things. But this awareness is not automatic, it develops when we are in contact with ideas, narratives, and viewpoints that cause us to consider differently what we naturally assume.

Literature is one of the most powerful tools to create this sort of awareness. In stories, metaphors, characters, and symbols, literature allows us to look beyond our immediate reality. It enables us to get into other periods, locations, or viewpoints and broaden our moral and political knowledge. Books do not only amuse, they represent society, reveal underlying truths, and make us question convention. From Plato's philosophical tracts to Dickens's social commentary, literature has long encouraged readers to reflect, question assumptions, and observe the forces that structure human existence. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a contemporary demonstration of this potential. Written in 1949, the book is not merely a novel about a totalitarian future, but a clear caution against totalitarian repression. Orwell constructs a society where surveillance, propaganda, and distortion of facts are employed to maintain control over the populace. Reading the book makes one ponder on such things happening around them in real life-whether in the past or even in the present day. Winston Smith's tale is not mere fiction; it compels readers to consider how readily freedom can be snatched and how consciousness itself can be moulded or manipulated.

By the process of reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, readers start developing critical consciousness as they experience notions of 'doublethink', the fluidity of truth, and the manipulation of history. These concepts force readers to inquire about reality and the machinery used to manage public perception. Reading becomes an act of waking up, whereby concepts of freedom, privacy, and truth transcend the abstract and become concretely meaningful through what happens in the lives of characters. This way, the novel encourages readers to see the same forces operating in their own societies and consider their role in counteracting them.

Literature and critical consciousness also have a two-way relationship. While literature can be used to wake up the mind, a critically conscious reader reads actively, questioning things and relating the story to their own life. These turns reading into an active experience rather than passive consumption. Questions naturally follow: What is truth? Who determines what we believe? How do people remain free under control? These are the kind of questions that critical consciousness is all about. It's not accepting things as they are and being willing to think and act otherwise.

This research, *From Reading to Awakening: Enkindling Critical Consciousness through Literature*, examines how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fosters such awareness among readers. The research delves into the narrative strategies Orwell employs, the book's historical and political background, and how readers can translate lessons gleaned from the novel into real-world applications. In the end, the research illustrates that literature is not merely for entertainment-it is a powerful vehicle for opening eyes, promoting introspection, and motivating individuals to envision and strive towards a more equitable, freer world.

Methodology:

In preparing this paper, a qualitative and analytical research methodology is used. The primary source of this analysis is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Guided by Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization, the paper treats reading as a reflective and transformative act through which individuals recognize systems of oppression and begin to question them. Apart from Freire's theory of conscientization, the analysis also uses Michel Foucault's understanding of

power and surveillance from his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1975). It also draws on other theories as secondary sources to support the discussion.

Literature Review:

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not just a dystopian novel; it is a work that raises serious questions about the living realities of human existence. Though the story is set in a fictional world, it prophesies the dangers of a society where every aspect of life, including daily activities, is under constant surveillance and control by a totalitarian regime. When read through the lens of Freire's idea of critical consciousness, the novel prompts readers to reflect on the nature of power and to question the forces that sustain oppression. This literature review, however, seeks to draw on Mitchel Foucault's idea of power, surveillance and discipline. It also draws on Louis Althusser's theory of ideology to frame the novel within a broader socio-political context. In this case, two seminal theoretical works prove indispensable: Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* (1975) and Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970).

Discussion:

The education system has been proclaimed as a means of liberation and simultaneously as a tool that helps preserve social control and inequality. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and pedagogist, introduced an advanced educational pedagogy, called Conscientisation or critical consciousness as a means to help people recognise and challenge the systematic inequalities and injustice built, maintained and perpetuated by process, practice, systems and institutions. According to Freire, education should awaken the people to see these hidden power structures so that they can act against them, rather than just accept them. If people remain unaware of these injustices or fail to question them, the cycle of oppression and injustice continue endlessly. In this sense, inequality or injustice can be considered as a disease that spreads when left untreated, and critical consciousness becomes the cure. As such, the concept of critical consciousness becomes important in both theory and practice which influence education, social change and policymaking.

In this context, literature becomes a powerful vehicle for cultivating critical consciousness, offering readers a lens to recognize, question, and challenge the social injustices embedded in the world around them. Just as Freire saw education as a space for awakening awareness, literature creates that same space through stories, voices, and lived experiences, exposing how inequality functions within societies. Literature mirrors the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts that define human life, helping readers see the realities around them more clearly, e.g., Charles Dickens in his novels like *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* exposes the plight of child labour, Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* shows colonial domination, and how the arrival of British missionaries and colonial administrators drastically disrupts the traditional Igbo society, dismantling its customs, religion, and authority structures etc. By portraying diverse struggles, injustices, and experiences, it encourages readers to grasp how systems and structures shape individual and collective destinies. Whether in novels, poems, or plays, literature invites audiences to step into perspectives different from their own,

nurturing empathy and a deeper understanding of how history and ideology influence human existence.

George Orwell authored *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948, shortly following World War II, when the world was rebounding from the ascension of totalitarian governments like Nazi Germany under Hitler and the Soviet Union under Stalin. These regimes were sustained by propaganda, censorship, and spying to manage their population. Orwell was severely concerned with the way that political power, when coupled with technology, could undermine liberty and personhood. In the novel, Orwell accurately describes various means of control employed by the Party to govern all walks of life. The Party is the totalitarian ruling party that controls the superstate of Oceania, in the fictional universe of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Under the leadership of the apparently all-powerful leader Big Brother, the Party exercises control through watchfulness, propaganda, and linguistic and psychological coercion. It governs every element of life-thought, word, history, and even love, so that no one can oppose its authority. Ever-present monitoring with gadgets such as telescreens makes citizens under constant observation, with no possibility of privacy. The control of language through 'Newspeak' limits thought by removing words that permit rebellion or autonomous thinking. Distortion of truth, as witnessed by the falsification of history by the 'Ministry of Truth', keeps citizens in a state of disorientation, unable to see reality and fiction. Last but not least, oppression of individuality compels everyone to conform and wipe out personal identities and feelings in favor of blind allegiance to Big Brother, an emblem of Omnipresent Authority. It symbolizes the all-knowing, all-seeing dictator who signifies the Party's complete dominance over the masses.

The novel begins with the description of Winston ascending the stairs to his flat as the lift is out of order since there is a power-cut. At each floor, on the opposite side of the lift-shaft, there is a big poster with a massive face staring from the wall with the title below it "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 1). This poster, and the caption is a powerful reminder to the citizens that they are being watched all the time. The notion that an invisible all-knowing thing watches every move or step we make makes people feel self-censored. This causes them to internalize surveillance and police their own conduct. "In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between the roofs, hovered for an instant like a bluebottle, and darted away again with curving light. It was the police patrol, peering into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered." (Orwell 2). Here, the helicopter is used to symbolize the omnipresent physical monitoring that keeps individuals in its sights. It wanders about inspecting windows, reminding the people that their privacy is no longer a thing. But Orwell immediately goes on to say that the patrols themselves do not matter, what really matters is the 'Thought Police'. This change of focus from physical to mental control demonstrates the underlying level of the Party's authority. The 'Thought Police', in this case, do not merely watch actions, they aim at individuals' thoughts and emotions. By rendering citizens afraid even of their own individual thoughts, the Party guarantees total compliance. Through these representations, Orwell illustrates that it can be more effective to dominate people's minds than to exercise authority through physical force. This relates quite well to Michel Foucault's concept regarding the manner in which power exists within society. Foucault describes how power doesn't necessarily have to resort to violence or punishment; rather, it operates by way of constant surveillance and discipline. When individuals believe that they are

constantly observed, they begin to control their own behavior due to fear. The vision of 'Big Brother' observing everyone evidently presents this concept, where power is held not by any force but by influencing people's thoughts and actions.

The manipulation is only limited to psychology, it is also carried out through language. The Party deliberately constructed a new language called 'Newspeak'. It was designed and introduced to the limit the thought process of the citizens. The words that come with rebellion like 'freedom', 'justice' etc. are deleted so people cannot even think about these concepts. In addition to 'Newspeak', the Party also inculcated the ideology of 'Doublethink', that is, believing two contradictory things simultaneously and accepting both as true. This conditioning in the mind compels people to accept anything the Party declares, even if it contradicts their personal memory or intelligence. The best example of this method is in the Party slogan: "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength." (Orwell 3).

Arriving at the theory of Conscientization, a theory that was formulated by Freire, we find that literature can uncover the veiled tactics employed to control and oppress individuals, we are able to observe how manipulation and propaganda work. Freire emphasizes that the reader should not only read words but also "read the world." The imaginary world of Nineteen Eighty-Four is not created simply to entertain or present a futuristic fantasy; it is designed to warn readers about a reality that could emerge if people lose their voice, stop resisting, or overlook everyday acts of dominance and oppression. Readers have a responsibility to look beyond the words and recognize the various forms of manipulation and control-how those in power gradually suppress individuality and use propaganda to influence citizens. Orwell's 'Ministry of Truth' exemplifies this process: it constantly rewrites history, distorts facts, and spreads propaganda to control public opinion. Similarly, in the modern world, governments often use state-controlled media to push their version of reality and shape public perception. Similar processes can be seen in the real world. For example, in the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli media often frames military actions as "counter-terrorism" or "self-defence," while Palestinian sources describe the same actions as "Israeli occupation" or "apartheid." Additionally, Western mainstream media frequently emphasizes Israeli casualties over Palestinian ones. This selective framing shows how governments and powerful institutions use propaganda to shape narratives, manipulate public perception, and maintain control-just as Orwell depicts in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Orwell's depiction clearly shows how institutions such as education and media reproduce dominant ideology, drawing on Louis Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatus from his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970). Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses helps explain how power and control operate in both fiction and reality through ideology, shaping people's beliefs, values, and perceptions.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, reading Nineteen Eighty-Four through the lens of Freire's Conscientization helps us understand the multiple ways power can manipulate thought and perception. First, it teaches an awareness of manipulation: readers learn that "truth" can be shaped to serve the interests of those in power, and that it is crucial to question the sources of information. Second, it encourages critical literacy, that is the ability to read not only texts but also the world,

identifying hidden power structures in politics, media, and society. Third, it highlights the importance of dialogue over pessimism. As Freire warns against passive learning, Orwell shows the dangers of accepting imposed truths without questioning, illustrating how unchallenged narratives can dominate society. Fourth, the novel underscores the need for empowerment through thought; independent thinking becomes a form of resistance against oppressive systems. Thus, to conclude, Orwell warns of the dangers of surveillance, propaganda, and loss of critical thought. On the other hand, Freire's pedagogy offers a path toward awakening and liberation through critical consciousness.

References:

1. Meyers, Jeffrey. *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.
2. Giroux, Henry A. *On Critical Pedagogy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
3. Giroux, Henry A. *Pedagogy of Resistance*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
4. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995.
5. Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971.
6. Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1949.