

Memory and Forgetting in Imaginative Dystopia

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Abstract: Through an interplay of repression and dissociation, the mind often obscures that which is either horrifying or just incongruous with a peaceful existence. Memory theorists such as Daniel L. Schacter delved into the ongoing argument about the reliability of traumatic memory (Schacter 276) while Jan Assmann in his seminal musings on Cultural Memory suggested that memories that are dissonant with one's present are often forgotten collectively in favour of communal and social harmony (Assmann J. 22). Assuming the essential fallibility and distorted, disjointed nature of traumatic memory, memory in Dystopian Fiction poses some interesting questions. Suppose social identity is created through collective memory, as Halbwachs suggests in the sense that past societies define the present, which describes future societies (Halbwachs 51). What defines a society that actively attempts to distance itself from and even forget the society of the past? My paper examines how memory manipulation and distortion function in Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* not in terms of the state-imposed political re-writing of history but rather on an individual level, how communal memory alterations impact personal memory. The paper hopes to conduct a study of how the early imaginative dystopias have contributed to the evolution of the genre and foregrounded the centrality of memory, history and archives. The paper argues that in the face of trauma, memory distortions act as an emollient between reality and the psyche allowing one to experience a sense of calm and stability where none exists.

Keywords: Memory, Dystopia, Identity, Memory Manipulation, History

Introduction

Memory and truth are two epistemic categories that often reflect reality irreconcilably contradictory. Neither remains constant in the face of social and political change or the general flow of time.

Nowhere is this truer than in the case of trauma and traumatic memories. While victim testimonies constitute the primary archival evidence for such events, these embodied testimonies are often distorted, reconstituted, and reshaped by the trauma. This unreliability of data, narrator, and even historical archival evidence often the result of deliberate silencing of the past by totalitarian regimes or even systematic destruction and recreation of the past by individuals to reconcile the drastic differences between the past and the present. Often, however, these can also be the result of the inaccuracies that characterise the human memory. Trauma, however, presents a particular case, since memory reconstruction in the face of trauma is often an admixture of remembering, forgetting, and reconstructing. The study of this process has become the preoccupation of historians, critics of memory studies, and political archivists who, in an act of sleuthing across time, aim to piece together ‘what really happened.’ These ontologically fragmented, neuro-biologically situated inquiries often reveal the malleable nature of truth and history:

After any revolution, history is rewritten, not just out of partisan zeal, but because the past has changed. Similarly, what we imagine we are working toward does a lot to define what we will consider doable action aimed at producing the future we want and preventing the future we fear. (Baccolini 520)

This inquiry is often explored objectively in the realm of dystopic fiction, where, unlike in the case of tumultuous human history, strategic disengagement with reality serves to disentangle the workings of individual and public memory. The purpose of my paper is twofold. First, my paper explores the idea of memory and its function in political dystopia by using two quintessential examples of his genre George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley’s *A Brave New World*. Second, and perhaps more importantly it attempts a revisionary look at the evolution of the genre from one that bemoans the fallibility of the human race, its corruptibility and its predilection to self-destructive violence to one that celebrates its resilience and intransigent drive for freedom in the face of oppressive forces.

Types of Dystopias: A Critical Survey

Baccolini makes a crucial distinction between two types of lenses used by dystopic fiction, imaginative and critical (521). Explaining this categorisation further, he cites the older dystopia (the example used in the essay is *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) where the protagonist and by extension, the reader, is a passive subject of fate and holds no agency to combat his own ultimate ruination. Thus, the dystopia is purely imaginative and serves to allow an altered perspective through which the reader may view their own reality. That, however, is where the function of such ‘imaginative’ dystopia stops. The more recent dystopic fiction on the other hand, (Baccolini cites Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Le Guin’s *The Telling*, and Butler’s *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*) are those where the most enduring aspects that stick to the reader’s/viewer’s imagination are the aspects of resistance. Within the speculative fiction of Marge Piercy, for example, the protagonist places herself within history and attempts to alter the future through her limited agency and action. “I am a dead woman now too... But I did fight them... I tried” (Piercy 181).

Piercy allows the protagonists hope and through their more ambiguous endings, maintains what she calls a “utopian impulse” within the text (Baccolini 521), highlighting the importance of resistance and dissent in overcoming and surviving a dystopia. But these seeds of revolt and opposition are sowed through the efforts of a penumbra of revolutionary zeal already existing in the earlier more fatalistic imaginative dystopias. Examples of these, as the paper will go on to argue, are the two that we are considering for the paper. Both imaginative and critical dystopic fiction use the dual tools of “estrangement and cognitive mapping” (Baccolini 521) but only one allows the reader agency, albeit vicariously, through the actions of the protagonist. Utopia, therefore, exists within dystopic fiction, albeit on the ‘outside’ as a suggestion or an absence (521). Dystopia often functions as an active warning against which the readers can contemplate their own futures and its various possibilities as well as threats.

While the two dystopias under discussion are, more imaginative rather than critical, I would argue that it is not possible to pigeonhole them into either category. Another distinction that Zaki

underlines as he sees in the critical work of Soren Baggesen, is that between a utopian and dystopian pessimism (Zaki 244) found within dystopia. Utopian pessimism, as defined by Baggesen is that which occurs ‘naturally’ due to historical forces (a perfect example of this may be the real-world dystopic realities of the rise of the Nazi party, Soviet surveillance, and militarism, Maoism, etc.). On the other hand, Dystopian pessimism, emphasises that it is the corrupt and corruptible nature of human beings that makes dystopia an inescapable future towards which mankind is headed. Both dystopic fictions serve as, in the words of Sheldon Wolin, “posting warnings” (qtd. in Zaki 244). It has also been pointed out by both Wolin and Zaki that these represent “covert utopian hope that readers will change the trajectory of their society” (244). Human nature may be deterministic and unchangeable, however, there is hope for the reader as these entail an optimistic assumption that the course of the future may be changed.

While critical dystopias in recent years have garnered much critical inquiry, the contributions made by imaginative dystopic fiction in the genesis and growth of the genre have largely been overlooked. This paper argues that the study of imaginative dystopias is critical to understanding the enduring significance of the genre in contemporary society. This is because they show evidence of nascent hope and utopic impulses that could possibly lend to a more critical study. Further, their treatment of memory as the central preoccupation of the genre sheds light on not just how narratives of the past are manipulated but also provides a framework through which these manipulations can be studied and the inaccuracies and obfuscations of the past can be reversed.

Memory, History, and Forgetting in Dystopic Fiction

Derrida, in his 1995 essay on archives successfully establishes a vital link between archives and those in power and even the nature of power itself. This, he does by going back to the etymological origins of the word “archive”, tracing it back to the Greek word “*arkheion*” which referred to “a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded” (Derrida 9). Therefore, the very origin of the word gives evidence of its association with political power. It was a testimony approved by the few ‘who commanded’ or, the official word. Since archives

are kept by a collective, public, or state body, they often reflect the hegemonic discourse. Therefore, they may often preserve certain records and documentation while ignoring or deliberately concealing and destroying others. In such cases, archives of the past may contradict memories of the past. Social upheavals, political oppression, and militant regimes may be reflected differently in archives. It is memory, therefore, that separates utopia from dystopia.

Kayışci Akkoyun also highlights the importance of memory in utopia and later in dystopia. For the former, he cites J. B. da Silva who asserted that “utopianism begins in memory” (Qtd. in Kayışci Akkoyun 63). Silva cites Plato’s theory of epistemology and his emphasis on the idea of ‘anamnesis’ in the formation of the perfect polis in the Republic to establish the link between memory and utopia. “Anamnesis”, according to Plato, hints at innate knowledge that is within mankind before birth, he hints at the fact that mankind has the imprint of perfection within him at birth and learning involves rediscovering this knowledge in life. The essay also mentions the importance of memory in Tomas More’s *Utopia* (63), since the commemoration of King Utopus and the whole tractate was based on Hythloday’s recollection. For the function of memory in dystopia, Akkoyun points out that, “totalitarian regimes and corporations reshape or sever the links between the past, the present, and the future” (Kayışci Akkoyun 62) and while his focus is on “oppositional recordkeeping” (62), the paper also underlines the complex cognitive clash between individual (private) memory and public (archival or collective) memory and how resistance in such regimes lies in the effort to preserve the latter from being overtaken, rewritten and subsumed by the latter. Foust, too, in his essay highlights the undeniable importance of memory as evidenced in the “central preoccupation with books, records, manuals, documents, dictionaries, and history” in dystopic fiction (86).

While totalitarian regimes aim to minimize the possibility of dissent by obliterating the link between the past and present through systematic manipulation and erasure of such memory archives, the dissenting protagonist often finds his means of preserving memory. In the opening chapter of his book, Carter F. Hanson quotes Tom Barnard who underlines the problem behind Utopias, calling them extraneous to reality; “What a cheat utopia are, no wonder people hate them. Engineer some

fresh start, an island, a new continent, dispossess them, give them a planet, sure! . . . So the utopias in books are pocket utopias too. Ahistorical, static, why should we read them?” (Qtd. Hanson, 20).

Hanson, too acknowledges the “problem of memory” within utopia which is, in own words, “the problem of utopias being sequestered from history” (Hanson 20). Further, critics like Baccolini emphasise the importance of placing oneself within history and making the past our own to allow oneself the agency to affect changes in the present and be more in charge of one’s future. Therefore, Dystopias play to a political agenda, inciting resistance and encouraging the reader to actively participate in public memory, adding dissonant voices of dissent and compliance into a progressively changeable history.

Dystopias seem sequestered from both history and political reality, however, unlike utopias, their obfuscation of memory, like its veiling of reality only serves to highlight its importance in framing the past, present, and future. Ironically, in an attempt to erase public memory, it often makes it appear all the more important and leads to “counter-narratives” (Kayaşci Akkoyun 64) of resistance. These counter-narratives entail individual accounts, witness statements, and victim testimonies that remember the past differently than the ‘official’ state-sponsored history. Akkoyun further admits that it was with the rise in Dystopic fiction that memory was given its real due importance in the construction of social and political reality:

[It was with the] rise of dystopian fiction that preservation, manipulation, and destruction of historical memory, archival politics, and the possibility of resistance through record keeping come to the foreground in line with the atrocities afflicting the twentieth century. (Kayaşci Akkoyun 64)

Therefore, Dystopia highlights the importance of memory through a cautionary display of what the world would be like without it. It encourages the protagonists within the text and the reader outside the text, to take a revisionary look at the ‘official’ versions of history. It normalises dissent against the reframing of history based on political agendas and bolsters the innate urge to archive individual experiences. As the author further notes about dystopia, they “portray how totalitarian regimes and

corporations reshape or altogether sever the links between the past, the present, and the future” (Kayaşci Akkoyun 64), thereby encouraging a distinction between “a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” in Baccolini and Moylan’s terms. (qtd. Kayaşci Akkoyun, 64).

As Ketelaar points out in his essay:

Records have power and are a power. They have power as instruments of authority and control: for effecting knowledge-power, control, surveillance and discipline-in too many cases for enforcing oppression too. The powers in society depend on record keeping. But records can also have the power to be instruments of empowerment and liberation. (Ketelaar 297)

Extending this argument further and applying it to the case of traumatic memories, Aleida Assmann points out that ‘truth’ is often directly associated with the memory of a victim in case of trauma (Assmann A. 1). Cathy Caruth, in her most seminal work on trauma and narrative posits that normal memory differs from traumatic memory just as everyday experiences differ from traumatic experiences (Caruth 117) in that traumatic experiences are ‘deferred’ and not fully grasped as they occur (117). Instead of following the rules of temporality, traumatic experiences often work using cyclic repetitions within the psyche of the victim (65). Caruth highlights the importance of literature (just like Freud) in understanding the complexity of trauma memory and its relationship with temporality (Caruth 3). The reason she cites this is that literature is often interested in the interplay between the known and the unknown (Caruth 3). This interplay is evidenced within the genre of dystopia.

Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic insight into the human mind have been frequently referenced by critics in their discussion on memory. Kayaşci Akkoyun employs Freud’s concept of the ‘death drive’ as a metaphor for the death of archives and the archivists in Dystopic fiction. As Freud says “the aim of all life is death” (Freud 32) so, arguably the end goal of memory is forgetting since all things instinctively march towards oblivion. Assmann presents a similar psychoanalytical argument for forgetting, this time by employing the Freudian concept of ‘belatedness’ (Assmann A.

4). Assmann expounds upon, the idea of ‘chosen amnesia’ which was introduced by Buckley-Zistel (qtd. in Assmann A. 11) by stating that, “it is not possible to neatly separate remembering and forgetting. Every act of remembrance, whether individual or collective, necessarily involves selective, partial, or otherwise biased forms of forgetting” (Assmann A. 5). In light of this, Assmann makes a compelling case for forgetting rather than remembering complex traumatic memories. To her, while remembering is a ‘social and cultural resource’ it is in forgetting that lies one’s ‘cultural achievement’ (53). She appraises the implications of memory thoroughly and concludes that forgetting mollifies the individual and makes him a better fit in a peaceful society. In cases of dystopia, the victims suffer a cognitive dissonance between the conflicting realities of their past and present. The only way to reconcile these contradictory realities is through forgetting. Assmann eventually makes the case for memory instead of forgetting but does admit that ‘short periods of forgetting’ (11) can help one acclimatise within a community and help deal with the emotional complexities of surviving a violent past.

Memory in Imaginative Dystopias: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*

While Utopia takes recourse to myth-making, dystopia according to Foust is “fictive in the full sense of the word: it is a sceptical, provisional and historically rather than mythically oriented” (81) in its adherence to the narrative of human imperfection. Perhaps it is because it aims to demystify some ingrained societal practices and believes that ritual plays a vital role in Dystopia. One frequently played-out ritual in dystopia is that of punishment of the “political scapegoat” (81). In *Nineteen Eighty-Nine*, this scapegoat is Winston Smith; in *Brave New World*, it is shown to be John. Here, education is debased to become a tool for behavioural control, and an initial burst of revolt is followed by despair and compliance.

The training of or the control of public memory is just another method of control displayed in science fiction. In the words of George Orwell, “he who controls the present controls the past, and he who controls the past controls the future” (Orwell 24). Foust elaborates on Orwell’s aphorism by saying that:

The key to political control lies in manipulating memory; the past constitutes our collective memory, which lies in books containing the empirical record of historical events. Without a sense of the past, of history as a series of verifiable actions, the individual cannot form political judgments, since he has no standard against which to compare present events.”

(Foust 85)

Since knowledge of past events gives agency to the individual, “Collective human memory is the true enemy of the dystopian state” (Foust 85). Thus, Winston is involved with the systematic destruction of records in his government-appointed task in the “Ministry of Truth” to re-write history and rid it of its so-called ‘inaccuracies.’ However, he also begins to keep his own diary writing, which is a capital offence as it represents faithful records and individual memories that are antithetical to the objectives of the state. As Jan Assmann puts it, “cultural memory transforms factual into remembered history, thus turning it into myth (Assmann J. 43)”. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a world where inaccuracies are systematically assimilated into history, popular discourse, public media, and even myth. In the words of George Orwell, “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary” (Orwell 28).

In the novel, the dissident protagonist Winston Smith does not remember his childhood, perhaps because his current dystopic hellscape is disparate from the memories of his home and mother. The state has impinged upon his memories till nothing has remained except the present “nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible” (Orwell 3). In the dystopic war-torn Oceania, Winston does not remember a time before the Party, since the past would serve only as a means of comparison and would be detrimental to the safety of the Party.

Winston’s seemingly insignificant act of defiance, writing a diary, would prove to have momentous reverberations. As Moylan points out, his act of writing was an attempt to ‘reappropriate language’ in order to ‘reconstruct an empowering memory’ (Moylan 170).

With the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order, but by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and "speak back" to hegemonic power (Moylan 170).

Winston ponders over the unreliability of his own mind in the face of the constant influx of falsehoods through media and language and concludes that the government of Oceania had uncovered the secret behind controlling the masses: "All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control', they called it: in Newspeak, 'doublethink'" (Orwell 24). This was the ability of an ideal citizen of a totalitarian regime to allow contradictions like knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehoods to co-exist simultaneously within his consciousness (24). The hostility towards memory is evidenced by the fact that the documents to be destroyed were sent down tubes called "memory holes" (26). At the end of the hole, the documents dropped would be incinerated, leaving no trace behind. The tubes served as an unmistakable metaphor for the place of memory in a land of fabricated pasts. Winston's ability to retain memory that conflicts with the licensed 'truth' makes him an ideal candidate to serve as the 'political scapegoat' by the end of the novel. It was through memory that he seized agency, although the process can be called neither complex nor dignified, he retained his individuality in a world of rigorous homogeneity—a process that left him feeling isolated "Was he, then, alone in the possession of a memory?" (40). Alida Assmann has argued that forgetfulness makes the condition more tolerable and Orwell seems to agree "Why should one feel it to be intolerable unless one had some kind of ancestral memory that things had once been different?" (Orwell 41). But the forgetfulness is temporary and memory resurfaces despite all conditioning and trauma.

The party also strategically mythologizes the figure of Big Brother who is emblematic of the party and serves as the face behind which faceless and powerful maintain anonymity. His origin and his ideas are falsified and widely accepted such that "the lie passed into history and became truth" (24). Winston often refers to the time before Oceania with vague nostalgia, as if attempting to

recollect 'ancestral memory' (67). This possibly aligns closely with the aforementioned idea of "anamnesis" as it hints at innate thought and impulses towards freedom. These recollections appear as fragmented vignettes of laughter and warmth, where he remembers his mother's love in a time before hatred and fear (208). As Hanson points out, "Discovering through memory that life in the past was better than in the present, dystopian dissidents, while perhaps prone to nostalgia, find a utopian focal point in the past that channels their resistance" (10).

Finally caught by the panoptic party's many screens, Winston is tortured and brainwashed. He suffers from a cognitive break where he can no longer distinguish between the real and the implanted memories and comes to accept the narrative given to him by the State "History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right" (108). Despite his ultimate and inevitable psychological unravelling, Winston warrants a special place in the discussion of dystopia and memory. Despite Orwell's elitist scorn at the notion of proletariat revolt, there are impulses in the novel that elevate it from a manifesto of despair to a treatise on freedom and hope for a better future. Not only did Winston pave the way for the future generations of dissenters and rebels that were written into existence in dystopian literature, but he also established the enduring importance of individual memory as a bulwark against the archival machinery of totalitarianism. As evidenced by his conversation with O'Brien during a torture session:

[O'Brien:] 'Ashes,' he said. 'Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.'

[Winston:] 'But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.' (172)

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley shows a similar world where people are manipulated using conditioning and chemical supplements. This world entails a society where people are biologically engineered into classes ever since their birth:

Till at last the child's mind is these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions is the child's mind. And not the child's mind only. The adult's mind too—all his life long. The mind that

judges and desires and decides—made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are our suggestions!" The Director almost shouted in his triumph. "Suggestions from the State."
(Huxley 13)

Individuality is completely eradicated through conditioning and drugs. Human constituents of the state are nothing more than cogs in the larger machinery of the State. This dehumanisation of the individual is seen by Theodore Adorno in his essay as a “contradictory production of contemporary capitalist culture” (qtd. in Moylan, 143). The condition of the subjects thus born and raised exposes a terrible truth about the contemporary capitalist, profit-driven enterprises that treat humanity as a means to an economic end. To this end, every resource that adds meaning and depth to humanity is strictly regulated and prohibited. In the famed, oft-repeated words of Ford, “History is bunk” (15), meaning that it adds no value to society and humanity’s wellbeing. With the status and class of a person predetermined at birth, there is a sinister undertone to “You really know where you are. For the first time in history” (3) as instead of words of liberation, they begin to drive home the lack of mobility and free will within this world. This conditioning is done to ensure identity, community, and stability. This brings to mind the words of Octavia Butler who says, “I’ve actually never projected an ideal society. I don’t believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (qtd. in Zaki, 239). An attempt to enforce uniformity and perfection leads to a society that curtails free will in favour of compliance and homogeneity.

In *Brave New World*, the archives of the past are not destroyed or heavily guarded, rather through systematic conditioning, people are made to believe that whatever existed before their own known reality was perverse and unenviable. Not only that, the past is distanced from the present in a way that makes it appear almost disconnected and disjointed from reality. Widespread social and cultural institutions like marriage and religion are looked at through the lens of estrangement, hostility, and even disgust. The activities of the elderly, for example:

“Work, play—at sixty our powers and tastes are what they were at seventeen. Old men in the bad old days used to renounce, retire, take to religion, spend their time reading, thinking—thinking!”

"Idiots, swine!" Bernard Marx was saying to himself. (26)

These people are made to disassociate with their past as a time of ‘savagery’ that was now beneath them. All the while they use narcotics to replace the essential aspects of human entelechy that they lost along the way, morality, love, faith, etc. “Anybody can be virtuous now. You can carry at least half your mortality about in a bottle. Christianity without tears—that’s what soma is” (102). The world is therefore one that has traded in memory and truth for narcotic-induced ‘happiness’ and an infantile existence as a part of a production line in a strictly utilitarian community. It is a hollow world devoid of art, culture, and all other facets of civilization that add depth and value to human life. “Our Ford himself did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness. Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can’t” (98).

John represents these lost values through his frequent quotations from the 900 books of Shakespeare’s collected work that he has memories of. The book anchors him in a world that he does not understand and finds unfamiliar and anaesthetized against the memories of the ‘real.’ John’s short venture into this world ends in disaster and death, much like Winston, he is unable to affect any real change however, his attempts at reconciling his moralistic old-world ideals with the new-age amoral reality are noteworthy. As a failed ‘social experiment’ he highlights the importance of negotiating with the past for the sake of preserving collective human values that give life meaning.

Conclusion

Herbert Marcuse analyses the state of man in a totalitarian dystopia by saying that it silences “those needs which demand liberation . . . while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society” (7). The two texts discussed in the paper have been subject to considerable scrutiny by dystopian scholarship. The current paper attempts to locate them within the

origins of the genre by defining their preoccupations, functions, and shortcomings. They may view the totalitarian world that they depict from an imaginative lens rather than a critical one but their preoccupation with history alleviates them from passive observations on man's imperfection to active inquiries into the function of history, memory, archives, and the role of forgetting in oppressive regimes. As Marcuse points out, "suppression of history... It is suppression of the society's own past—and of its future, [and] inasmuch as this future invokes the qualitative change, the negation of the present" (97). Despite the defence for forgetting put forth by both Aleida Assmann and Cathy Caruth, it is memory that constitutes the finer aspects of humanity. While imaginative dystopias like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may bring to light the fantastic demise of utopic aspirations, they serve as speculative discourse on the inimitable place of memory and forgetting in human civilization. It is an interplay between memory and forgetfulness that constitutes the basis of human action and agency and indeed comprises the fabric with which the tapestry of identity is weaved.

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