

Why Would Some Feminist Activists Want to Ban *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Why Shouldn't They?

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Abstract

This article critically engages with the feminist discourse surrounding George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with a specific focus on the calls for its prohibition arising from perceived gender biases. The central inquiry at the heart of this exploration revolves around whether the perceived gender discrimination in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* warrants its prohibition. Detractors posit that Orwell's delineation of women, especially through characters like Julia, reinforces entrenched gender norms. Conversely, proponents assert that the novel's core message transcends gender-specific concerns, functioning as an enduring cautionary tale against the deleterious effects of totalitarian regimes.

The article succinctly encapsulates the prevailing feminist critique of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, undertaking an examination of the representation of women and gender relationships within the dystopian framework. Scholars argue that Julia's character epitomizes a passive and objectified perspective of women, conforming to male desires and perpetuating patriarchal viewpoints. This scrutiny extends to the thematic suppression of sexuality and gender within dystopian literature, underscoring the novel's limitations in addressing gender-related intricacies.

Drawing upon feminist literary criticism and amalgamating various theoretical approaches such as historical context analysis, textual scrutiny, and thematic exploration, the article advocates for the legitimacy and significance of the critique. Despite the manifestation of patriarchal ideologies in the portrayal of women in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the article delves deeper into the pervasive theme of patriarchal control in the narrative. It examines how the Party regulates reproduction and sustains gender norms, contending that the novel persists in its relevance by fostering discussions on oppressive governance and authoritarian control. The paper accentuates the novel's nuanced exploration of gender dynamics, implicitly challenging traditional constructions. Emphasizing the value of dystopian fiction in feminist discourse, the article highlights the role of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in catalyzing conversations about gender equality and institutional reform.

In conclusion, the article addresses the perils associated with the misuse of censorship mechanisms for literary works and advocates for the preservation of a diverse literary discourse. The proposition to ban *Nineteen Eighty-Four* based on its gender portrayal is posited as counterproductive, with the potential to stifle critical engagement and impede meaningful dialogue. The ongoing controversy surrounding the novel underscores the imperative of sustained discussions, encouraging readers to scrutinize and challenge prevailing gender and political norms. Ultimately, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is positioned as a valuable work contributing to broader narratives of social justice and equality.

Keywords: George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, gender representation, dystopian literature, feminist literary criticism, patriarchal control, censorship

1. Introduction

Is there any situation where “TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE” applies? The answer lies in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, written by British author George Orwell, is an enduring literary masterpiece in the anti-utopian and political genre. The narrative follows Winston, a government employee responsible for falsifying the news to maintain the rule of Big Brother in the fictional nation of Oceania. Through Winston’s professional, romantic and ideological encounters, we are drawn into a world plagued by deception and surveillance, epitomized by the alarming symbol “TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE” (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 349).

However, transitioning into the digital age, an exploration into the e-book forums dedicated to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* unveils a public shift in focus and interpretation of Orwell’s anti-utopian narrative. Amidst expected debates around Orwell’s dissection of totalitarianism and surveillance, a vehement dialogue concerning gender representation surfaces, illuminating the text with contemporary perspectives. The debate centered on a pertinent feminist inquiry: does the perceived sexism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provide a valid basis for prohibition? Some critics have argued that Orwell’s portrayal of women reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. While advocates counter that the fundamental message of this book goes beyond gender matters to deliver a perennial caution against the corruptive influence of totalitarian regimes.

Venturing further, this paper examines the feminist criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, exploring the depiction of female characters and gender relations within the novel’s dystopian and totalitarian context. Through an analysis of the intersection of gender, power, and control, the discussion navigates through the novel’s representation of patriarchal oppression, the objectification of women, and the potential value of such a narrative in fostering a broader discourse on gender equality. This analysis seeks to compare the potential harm that can arise from the novel’s representation of gender with its sustained relevance in examining oppressive leadership and encouraging fruitful discussions on gender conventions and political autonomy.

2. A Feminist Critique of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

The feminist critique of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has generated enduring debates and discussions, focusing primarily on the limitations of female characterization and the marginalization of the second gender in society. While universally acclaimed for its portrayal of a dystopian world and oppressive regime, the novel hasn’t escaped feminist criticism for embodying a passive and objectifying view of women, particularly through characters like Julia. These critiques have highlighted the narrative’s limitations in depicting the experiences of women who endure the same oppressive society as men, where both genders are subject to oppression (Anna, 2016, pp. 61–90).

Feminist criticism has been directed towards the characterization of Julia in Orwell’s novel. Scholars note that Julia’s promiscuous and passionate love lacks authenticity, instead conforming to male desires and perpetuating the patriarchal viewpoint. Her ultimate subordination by the oppressive regime highlights the depiction of women as passive and objectified figures in the narrative (Anna, 2016; Ning, 2008).

Furthermore, feminist scholars like DİKİCİLER (2017) have delved into the suppression of sexuality and gender within dystopian literature, encompassing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They posit that while the novel delivers a potent critique of authoritarianism, it falls short in its treatment of gender-related issues. The protagonist’s mother and sister only appear in his memories as catalysts in his journey, while the alleged love of his life merely serves as an accessory to the protagonist’s overarching narrative. All the female characters seem devoid of a life entirely their own, leaving the narrative bereft of depictions of women’s circumstances and emotions within this totalitarian world. This perspective underscores the imperative of scrutinizing how gender is portrayed in dystopian narratives and whether these portrayals challenge or bolster existing power structures.

A primary concern voiced by feminists is the predominance of the male perspective throughout the novel. Winston, the male protagonist, occupies a central role, and the story predominantly unfolds through his eyes. While this narrative choice adeptly conveys the dystopian world and the authoritarian regime, it simultaneously raises questions about the sidelining of women’s experiences and narratives. Feminists posit that this singular focus on Winston’s experiences may marginalize the stories of women enduring the same oppressive regime (Wang & YANG, 2019).

Online commentary and academic discourse have amplified these feminist concerns, leading to extensive deliberations regarding the feminist interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These debates have underscored the novel’s limitations in addressing gender-related issues, eliciting calls for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of gender dynamics within dystopian fiction (Zhang, 2013).

In summary, the feminist critique of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* revolves around its portrayal of women and its concentration on the male protagonist’s perspective. Critics argue that the novel’s narrative choices contribute to a passive and objectified portrayal of women, potentially marginalizing their experiences within the dystopian society. These criticisms have catalyzed substantial academic and online discourse, accentuating the demand for more comprehensive and nuanced depictions of women’s experiences within dystopian narratives.

3. Evolution of Historical and Cultural Contexts

The nuanced representation of gender in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural milieu of the post-World War II era in which Orwell composed this seminal novel. The war epoch disrupted conventional gender roles, compelling women to assume diverse roles in the labor force and military support, thereby gaining an elevated societal standing (Langdon & Klomegah, 2013). However, the post-war period witnessed a reversion of these progressive gender dynamics as societal expectations urged women to relinquish their jobs to returning soldiers, reinstating traditional domestic roles.

Analyzing this post-war era through a gender relations framework, as outlined by Raewyn Connell & Pearse (2015), unveils a period marked by fluctuating gender dynamics. The era reinforced traditional gender symbols associating masculinity with authority and breadwinning, while femininity was tethered to domesticity and nurturing. Despite women's significant wartime contributions, the post-war narrative often eclipsed these achievements, reinstating male authority in both public and private domains.

Through *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell mirrors these social patterns of gender normativity, particularly through the character of Julia, who often finds herself ensnared in traditional femininity. A feminist critique reveals a pronounced gender binary in the story, resonating with the societal norms of the time and echoing the patriarchal ethos that prevailed in the post-war period.

Transitioning to contemporary times unveils a stark transformation in gender representation, significantly propelled by feminist movements like the MeToo campaign. The MeToo movement, as Clark-Parsons (2019) articulates, has reframed gender-based violence as a systemic issue, challenging patriarchal norms persistently. This global dialogue on gender equality has fostered a conducive environment for modern feminist perspectives to reevaluate literary narratives like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In conclusion, Orwell's depiction of gender, once reflective of traditional gender norms, now faces scrutiny within an evolving feminist discourse. The historical gender portrayal in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* juxtaposed against the modern feminist movement underscores its enduring relevance, depicting the dynamic interplay between historical and contemporary gender norms. Although rooted in a bygone era, Orwell's narrative continues to resonate with modern audiences due to the inertia of enduring unequal gender dynamics.

4. Text Analysis

4.1 Feminist Literary Criticism

With feminist literary criticism, analysis reaches into the core of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, exposing a narrative landscape dominated by male perceptions and behaviors, where female characters seem to be mere satellites floating on a male-driven narrative arc. As a theoretical horizon, feminist literary criticism empowers a meticulous dissection of these character dynamics, bridging the gap between the text and broader gender discourse (Devaney & Shaw, 1989). This framework is grounded in feminist theory, questioning the representation of patriarchal ideologies, gender stereotypes, and female experiences in literary texts.

4.1.1 Representation of Women

Having laid the theoretical foundations, allow us to consider the representation of women in the novel as a reflection of patriarchal ideologies. The problem arises from the relatively few female characters, with Julia being the most prominent. Such lack of female representation can be seen as a reflection of the patriarchal system that suppresses or marginalizes women voices. Among the few remaining female characters, such as Mrs. Parsons, are typically portrayed in traditional or stereotypical roles, mirroring wider societal expectations and restrictions on women. "Mrs. Parsons' eyes flitted nervously from Winston to the children, and back again. In the better light of the living-room he noticed with interest that there actually was dust in the creases of her face" (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 30). In Chapter 2, the first mention of Mrs. Parsons, the male protagonist regards her as the old, pale housewife with a judgmental glance, contemptuously commenting on her defunct femininity. In this chapter, the author intends to show the surveillance and antagonism of the offspring in the family towards their parents. The presence of Mrs. Parsons is suspected of being objectified. She has no subjective thought in which all her movements and mannerisms are reprocessed under the gaze of Winston. "But what most struck Winston was the look of helpless fright on the woman's greyish face" (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 31). This reflects the patriarchal focus and the reduction of women to mere objects or tools of political control.

4.1.2 Patriarchal Control

Having dissected the portrayal of female characters, it is evident that patriarchal control is a pervasive theme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Junior Anti-Sex League promotes celibacy and control over sexual behaviors, which could be seen as a metaphor for patriarchal control over women's sexuality in the real world. The Party's regulation of reproduction and prohibition of sex revolves around the ideals of artificial insemination and the abandonment of family ties, portraying an anti-utopian vision of patriarchal authority's power over women's

reproductive rights and family unit. “There were even organizations such as the Junior Anti-Sex League, which advocated complete celibacy for both sexes. All children were to be begotten by artificial insemination (ARTSEM, it was called in Newspeak) and brought up in public institutions” (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 84).

Moreover, the Party’s control over historical narratives and truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can also be interpreted from a feminist perspective. It parallels how patriarchal systems have historically controlled narratives to marginalize or erase women’s contributions and experiences. By analyzing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through a feminist lens, one can explore how Orwell’s dystopian narrative critiques extreme forms of control and power dynamics, which are emblematic of oppressive patriarchal systems.

4.2 Insights from Postmodern Feminism

The appeal to assess and possibly ban *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from a feminist perspective is steeped in a societal transition toward gender equality and a high awareness of gender issues, especially in the aftermath of postmodern feminist thinking. Postmodern feminism resists fixed definitions of femininity or masculinity and advocates for the recognition of multiple gender identities and expressions (PILLAI, 1996). Critics argue that the novel perpetuates harmful stereotypes of women through its characterizations and narrative focus.

4.2.1 Characterizations

The character of Julia appears to be complex as her sexual and affective relationship with Winston is a revolt against the grip of the Party. Nonetheless, through the relationship she has with the male character Winston, her uniqueness can also be seen as limited or defined (Zhang, 2013). This is evident in her first appearance, when Winston gazes upon her as a beautiful but rebellious woman who appears to follow the rules, whilst in fact deliberately accentuating her figure. This depiction obviously centers the male and leads the reader to receive a preconceived notion that Julia is a licentious and wisecracking character, rather than objective.

A narrow scarlet sash, emblem of the Junior Anti-Sex League, was wound several times round the waist of her overalls, just tightly enough to bring out the shapeliness of her hips. Winston had disliked her from the very first moment of seeing her. He knew the reason. It was because of the atmosphere of hockey-fields and cold baths and community hikes and general clean-mindedness which she managed to carry about with her. (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 13)

4.2.2 Narrative Focus

The portrayal of violent misogyny in the text underscores a patriarchal narrative, critiqued by postmodern feminist theory for perpetuating harmful gender norms and power dynamics.

“I hated the sight of you,” he said. “I wanted to rape you and then murder you afterwards. Two weeks ago, I thought seriously of smashing your head in with a cobblestone. If you really want to know, I imagined that you had something to do with the Thought Police.” The girl laughed delightedly, evidently taking this as a tribute to the excellence of her disguise. (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 152)

The passage depicts the male speaker’s aggressive and sexist fantasy towards the female character. It reveals a patriarchal ideology that objectifies and exploits women. Examining the passage through a postmodern feminist perspective, it can be interpreted as an illustration of toxic masculinity and gender-based violence that women are frequently subjected to. The male speaker’s violent fantasies towards the female character stem from a perceived threat or fear, which may be related to her perceived association with the Thought Police. Postcolonial critique often explores power dynamics and how they are maintained through fear, violence, or subjugation. Winston’s response could be viewed as a reaction to perceived threats to his own power or status.

5. The Value of Dystopian Fiction: In Feminism

The nuanced exploration of oppressive structures and gender dynamics in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* unveils the potent capacity of dystopian fiction as a medium for critiquing, challenging, and envisioning alternatives to prevailing gendered realities. As expounded by Gleason et al. (2010), the narrative intricately intertwines sexual norms, power dynamics, and societal structures, portraying sex as a conduit of resistance against totalitarian control. Orwell’s narrative, although primarily targeting totalitarianism, extends its critique to encompass patriarchy, thereby implicitly challenging any form of oppressive governance.

Diving into the portrayal of gender relations, the objectification of women emerges as a representation of the dehumanization and suppression of individuality under oppressive regimes. Both Julia and Winston are equally subjected to the Party’s ruthless control over their sexual and familial relationships, exemplifying the broader theme of surveillance, propaganda, and ideological indoctrination that transcends gender boundaries. While there are issues with the portrayal of female characters that may seem inconsistent with contemporary feminist perspectives due to Orwell’s personal experiences and the time’s limitations, these very issues ignite feminist reflection, as illustrated in the quote: “The aim of the Party was not merely to prevent men and women from forming loyalties which it might not be able to control. Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure

from the sexual act...” (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 83).

Furthermore, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* subtly challenges traditional gender constructions. For instance, Winston’s emotional vulnerability and his capitulation under torture deviate from the stoic and emotionally restrained archetype of traditional male roles, defying conventional masculinity norms. Orwell articulates this in a pivotal moment in the narrative, showcasing Winston’s desperate plea: “Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don’t care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!” (Orwell, 1949/2008, p. 362).

Moreover, the modern feminist discourse, galvanized by movements like MeToo, necessitates a reevaluation of gender portrayals within seminal works like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Clark-Parsons (2019) points out, the essence of the MeToo movement is to stimulate broad, lasting discussion through the viral spread of Twitter. This coincides with the value of literature that encourages a spirit of questioning rather than providing precise answers. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as a vital political allegory, fosters a nuanced exploration of gender representation at a juncture when feminists are vigorously advocating for political equality and structural reform.

In conclusion, Orwell’s narrative, while anchored in a bygone era, continues to resonate with modern audiences, predominantly due to the persistent nature of gender disparities. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not only critiques oppressive governance but also invites a reexamination of gender dynamics, both of which are pivotal to feminist discourse and action. Through this lens, the novel emerges as a timeless piece that contributes to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality and systemic reform, showcasing the enduring value of dystopian fiction in feminist discourse.

6. The Danger of Censorship and the Power of Discourse

The motion to ban George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on the grounds of the novel’s expression of gender and misogyny may be a disturbing reflection of the thematic exploration of censorship and authoritarianism. This is because the prevalence of censorship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* highlights its role as a weapon used by totalitarian regimes to suppress, manipulate and regulate public discourse. Such bans can inadvertently embody the dangerous Orwell warnings of a single narrative controlled by a few.

Advocating the removal of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from literary discourse may discourage the critical engagement and vigorous debate that are essential to a healthy democratic society. Exposure to challenging or offensive material is the catalyst for meaningful conversations that are rich, diverse, and nuanced. Encouraging critical engagement with 1984, rather than banning it, supports an educational framework in which challenging material is dissected, discussed, and debated, rather than silenced. (Kramsch, 1985) The novel’s portrayal of gender is controversial. Nevertheless, it provides an opportunity to analyze gender relations, as well as the wider social and political issues highlighted in Orwell anti-utopian vision. These debates can serve as a platform for challenging and confronting the gender stereotypes presented in the text, fostering a deeper understanding, and potentially contributing to the wider movement towards gender equality.

Banning texts could also set a dangerous precedent. Once down the path of censorship, the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable become vague, shifting with the prevailing social or political winds. This is an unsettling landslide, in keeping with the repressive controls imposed by the authorities in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

7. Conclusion

In analyzing George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from a feminist perspective, the investigation exposes the nuanced discussions regarding gender depiction in the wider political landscape of totalitarianism and censorship. Specific demands have been made by certain feminists to prohibit the novel based on the portrayal of female characters as oppressive and underrepresented. The validity of these depictions perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes in today’s evolving social narratives is argued, despite reflective of the era in which the novel was written. Nonetheless, the counterargument emphasizes the enduring value of the novel in critically examining oppressive governance and authoritarian control, themes that transcend gender, but remain intensely relevant.

Although the text’s narrative focuses on a male protagonist, it inadvertently provides a platform for exploring the intersectionality of gender, power, and control. The portrayal of women in the novel, even if it may be limited and arguably biased, serves as a mirror that reflects the specific social norms of the time. Moreover, fueled by movements such as MeToo, modern feminist discourse provides a lens through which readers can re-evaluate and dispute the construction of gender in Orwell’s narrative, underscoring the novel’s potential to spark broader conversations about gender equality and institutional reform.

In addition, the exploration of censorship and authoritarian control within the novel contrasts with the controversy surrounding its outward representation of gender. The discourse surrounding 1984 showcases how literature can prompt dialogue, challenge established conventions and foster critical engagement with intricate social issues.

In conclusion, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should not be banned by feminists because of its incomplete representation of gender. Despite its utopian setting, the novel sheds light on tangible and ongoing struggles for gender equality, individual freedom, and the dangers of a single narrative. Rather than relegating the novel to the ranks of outdated literature, it is important to examine it through a modern feminist lens to foster a productive conversation that encourages readers to analyze and challenge not only the text, but also the dominant gender and political norms it reflects. The controversy surrounding Orwell's stories highlights the need to maintain a pluralistic literary discourse in which challenging and contemporary works can be critiqued, debated and used to contribute to broader narratives of social justice and equality.

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