

A Dehumanization Protocol: Tradition and Memory in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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Abstract

The 20th Century was a time period in which political issues and concepts of humanities such as collective memory were widely discussed due to the political atmosphere of the world. In his dystopian masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell also participated in the discussion in his own way, portraying a totalitarian regime where memory is not only suppressed, but constantly altered and manipulated in order to create fear. This research aims to provide an analysis of how the concepts of invented traditions and the manipulation of collective memory find their embodiments within Orwell's narrative, how do they reflect on Winston, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and how these issues are manipulated in order to establish loyalty for the regime, stripping people of their individuality and their critical thinking. The research will draw its theoretical framework from Hobsbawm's and Said's arguments and views on the concepts of invented traditions and memory respectively, with the findings of researchers of Orwell, such as Elsa Bouet and Nicolae Gheran, function as supplementing arguments, theories and conclusions.

Keywords:

memory, invented traditions, George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Hobsbawm, Said, Dystopias

İnsanlıktan Uzaklaştırma Sistematiği: George Orwell' in 1984 Romanında Hafıza ve Sahte Gelenekler

Özet

20. Yüzyıl, dünyamızın içinde bulunduğu atmosfer göz önüne alındığında, politik sorunların ve toplumsal hafıza gibi kavramların yaygın şekilde tartışıldığı bir dönem olmaktadır. Distopya türü eserler arasında bir başyapıt olan *1984* romanında, George Orwell' de tartışmaya kendi yöntemiyle katılarak, hafızanın sadece baskılanmadığı, aynı zamanda sürekli değiştirilerek ve manipüle edilerek korku ikliminin oluşturulduğu totaliter bir rejimi anlatarak katkıda bulundu. Bu araştırma, sahte gelenekler ve toplumsal hafızanın manipülasyonu gibi kavramların, Orwell' in anlatısında nasıl hayat bulduğu, bu kavramların kitabın ana karakteri Winston üzerindeki etkileri ve kişilerin

bireysellikleri ve analitik düşünme yeteneklerinden soyutlanarak, rejime bağlılıklarının artırılması amacıyla bu kavramların nasıl manipüle edildiği konuları üzerine bir araştırma sunmayı hedeflemektedir. Araştırma, teorik arkaplanını Eric Hobsbawm ve Edward Said' in, sahte gelenekler ve hafıza üzerine ortaya koydukları teorilere dayandırmakta olup, Elsa Bouet ve Niculae Gheran gibi Orwell araştırmacılarının bulguları, destekleyici argümanlar ve teoriler olarak araştırmada görev üstlenmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler:

Bellek, Sahte gelenekler, George Orwell, 1984, Hobsbawm, Said, Distopyalar

From a sociological point of view, the concept of memory can easily be divided into two categories, one being the collective memory, which is often intertwined with the tradition in nationalistic narratives of a society, and individual memory, which is more commonly referred as personal recollections of the events that an individual experiences or witnesses throughout his or her lifetime. While the tradition and collective memory of a society is mostly comprised of the events that are experienced by the society itself and its interpretations by the individuals within or outside of its social group, individual memories and recollections play an undeniably important role. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents an impressive display of how thoughts, memories and traditions can be manipulated in a regime whose primary focus is to justify its claims of validity and keep its subjects in line, mainly in order to survive. Academic interest in dystopian literature has seen a rise in recent years, and although studies of the genre are usually focused on the grim image of the scientific future that it prophesizes, it also offers considerable potential in scholarly work on memory. As a concept of major importance in the novel, memory has been discussed by scholars of Orwell, such as Niculae Gheran and Elsa Bouet. As a concept, memory is a crucial element when studying dystopian fiction, since it paves the way for exploring the human factor in a seemingly otherwise sterile universe. Thus, this article will attempt to provide insight into the manipulation of individual and collective memories of the citizens of Oceania, one of the continental superstates in Orwell's world, by various methods of subjugation, oppression, and repression as a method of destruction of personal identities, embodied within the plot of the novel in the Two Minutes Hate sessions and

the Ministry of Truth, drawing primarily from Edward Said's theories and Eric Hobsbawm's claims regarding memory, tradition and invention.

Said's Perspectives on Memory and Tradition

In his article, "Invention, Memory and Place," Edward Said describes collective memory as "not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning" (185). Indeed, the collective memory of a society is known to take over the individual memories of those who live in it, when influenced deeply enough. This condition is exemplified specifically in times of dire situations, such as times of warfare. The effects of the Nazi propaganda machine on German society would be a striking example of that, as Germany found itself in another large-scale all-out war in a matter of years following its defeat in the First World War, with the experiences of a collapsed economy, heavy reparations for the war and the struggles under the Treaty of Versailles were still fresh in the memories of the individuals lived under the new rising power of fascism. These hardships and difficulties pushed the German society to come together around a leader who promised them release from the chains they were bound with by the treaties after the Great War. This, indeed, was not happening solely in meetings in town squares, but also in the intelligentsia of the Germany of the time. Before moving from history towards the scope of this research, Said provides a picturesque description of how collective memory functions in a society, by stating the following:

Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority. Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths, the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory, both in school and university, is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider's understanding of one's country, tradition, and faith. (176)

The manipulation of history, and the collective memory of the society that history is concerned with, is a concept that creates the framework of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet, as shown above, according to Said, it is impossible to distance historical study from the aims of the institutions, and governments, in any case. For Said, the concepts of memory and history have a role to play in increasing the loyalty of the people living within that society, by providing

them with a sense of belonging in a community. Elsa Bouet provides a similar approach to the matter, stating “the study and teaching of history does not only lie in being a neutral collection of facts and truths, but in a bias study of the past, to ensure social cohesion” (Bouet, 36). Indeed, this idea has manifested its merit in multiple occasions, and Said takes this another step further, stating that “national identity always involves narratives-of the nation's past, its founding fathers and documents, seminal events, and so on. But these narratives are never undisputed or merely a matter of the neutral recital of facts” (177).

The word “narrative” here stands out, as Alon Confino claims that it is beneficiary in writing history (391). As he also points out, a fixed narrative, one that follows a linear movement and argument, looks “at the past to prove a belief, not to test a hypothesis” (Confino 391). Yet, as he also argues, open narratives are becoming a dominant force in the humanities:

Open narrative self-consciously uncovers the process by which the historian constructs his or her argument, chooses the evidence, and articulates an interpretation. Rather than presenting history as a self-contained, coherent unfolding of facts, open narrative moves toward an analysis that allows memory, ambiguity, negotiations, and contingency. [...] Cultural history and memory studies have exemplified the move toward open narratives. (Confino 392)

While Confino’s argument might seem to be out of place, it has a certain point that will prove useful in connection with the concept of invented traditions. As he also claims, a narrative is chosen to prove a point; and while there are no pure open or fixed narratives when making an analysis of history, memory or traditions, it is ultimately necessary to choose from a range of facts in order to reach to a conclusion. This, in turn, has every possibility to evolve into a movement away from objectivity, in order to create a national identity that people can adhere to, with people being ready “not so much to kill, but willingly to die for” their imagined community (Anderson 7). With all this taken into consideration, it is safe to claim that collective memory is not only highly susceptible to manipulation, it has every possibility to be used and abused as a tool by historians, scholars, and even governments for spreading misinformation, enforcing a certain ideology into the individual minds of its citizens, and creating a feeling of belonging among them, enabling the citizens to feel safer under a collective identity.

Yet, in order to see how collective memory reflects as a tool of manipulation in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is necessary to refer to Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of*

Tradition, in which he argues that traditions are mostly invented and are not as old as they might appear in the first glance (1). He proposes the term “invented tradition” for “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1). This carries a striking importance when analyzing the behavioural patterns of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but in a more general sense, a tradition seeks to connect people with the past. The main difference between collective memory and tradition, in this case, becomes the means of achieving loyalty for those who are part of a society. While collective memory functions as a method of creating a sense of belonging in the individuals, in the case of traditions, this is taken another step further to create a connection with the past and present in order to unify a society, sometimes against a common enemy. With tradition, which Said claims to be “using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way” (179), the achievement of unity becomes a much more obtainable goal for any government or institution aiming to connect people to each other.

Taking the aforementioned into consideration, one can come to the conclusion that both invented traditions and the misguidance of the collective memory can lead to a society’s detachment from its core humanitarian values, in line with the state’s aims to manipulate them or keep them in line. In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this becomes the everyday reality for all the citizens of Oceania, as their victimization becomes apparent through the protagonist’s point of view. The Party’s structured efforts to strip people from their individuality, namely the Two Minutes Hate sessions and the existence of the Records Department, are among the most ruthless dehumanization protocols to be found in English dystopian literature.

A Tradition to Unify

According to Hobsbawm, invention of traditions “is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past” (4). In *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm further argues that “invented traditions” are “highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation’, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest” (13) and describes three types of invented traditions:

They seem to belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour. (9)

Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* under the light of those three types would be revolutionary to even a common reader himself/herself, yet the definitions of Hobsbawm's types seem to be embodied in one certain event in the book. The invention of public ceremonies and the importance attested to them becomes a particular focal point for Said as well (178), and, alongside with Hobsbawm's statements, provide a useful approach to read into the Two Minutes Hate and its effects on the participating citizens of Oceania, regarding the destruction of their individuality and manipulation of their collective memory.

Hobsbawm provides the example of the Nuremberg party rallies for invented traditions (4), and considering the timeline in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was created, it becomes a possibility that Orwell may be influenced by the heavy symbolism which predominantly occupied the Nazi gatherings, while describing the Two Minutes Hate sessions. Regardless of his influences, Orwell's power of observation is manifested splendidly in the portrayal of the Two Minutes Hate, as the gathering of the Party members in a room on a regular basis and giving them an outlet to direct all their hatred for the opponents of the current regime provide a picturesque example for Hobsbawm's earlier description for the 'invented tradition', "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition" (1). The opponent, Goldstein in the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, becomes the scapegoat for everything that the individuals might think that the Party fails to provide, and his previous affiliation with the Party enables him to be portrayed as a counter-revolutionary enemy of the people.

Before the specifics of the Two Minutes Hate, it is important to take a closer look at what Orwell portrays through Winston's eyes regarding Goldstein. Although Winston is shown to exhibit subversive actions in the eyes of the Party at his own home, such as avoiding the sight of telescreens, and he can be portrayed as "the last man" who is able to criticize a dystopian state, as also argued by Niculae Gheran (167), Winston himself is not immune to the portrait of Goldstein provided by the Party. His own description of Goldstein as "a lean Jewish face, with a

great fuzzy aureole of white hair and a small goatee beard — a clever face, and yet somehow inherently despicable, with a kind of senile silliness in the long thin nose” (14) exhibits Winston’s perception of Goldstein is also sullied by the Party indoctrination. Although Winston is aware that the words of Goldstein are fabricated by the Party, as they were “so exaggerated and perverse that a child should have been able to see through it, and yet just plausible enough to fill one with an alarmed feeling that other people, less level-headed than oneself, might be taken in by it” (14) it seems not to make a lot of difference. Goldstein was using more Newspeak words than a current member of the party “in rapid polysyllabic speech which was a sort of parody of the habitual style of the orators of the Party” (14). Even for “the last man” who is able to hold an extent of individuality despite the aggressiveness of the Party’s suppression, here the reader is presented with the fact that traditions, alongside with the twisted facts infected into the collective memory of an individual through societal engineering, has an overwhelming effect on any sort of individual thought or personality, regardless of their abilities of critical thinking.

As for the Hate session itself, the picture presented through Winston becomes even grimmer. As if following Hobsbawm’s rule of repetition for any tradition to settle in, the Two Minutes Hate is “a daily propagandistic spectacle designed to reaffirm the viewers’ love for Big Brother” (Finigan 436). The Hate first starts to induce repeated sounds and imagery, such as “row after row of solid-looking men with expressionless Asiatic faces, who swam up to the surface of the screen and vanished, to be replaced by others exactly similar” (Orwell 15), with a rhythmic trampling of soldiers’ boots forming the background for the words of Goldstein. This obviously is an attempt to induce a trance-like state in the viewers, before the image of their saviour takes center stage, and it is fully accomplished in the session Winston describes. The audience starts “leaping up and down in their places and shouting at the tops of their voices” (16) and rhythmic cursing can be heard. Even Winston finds himself to participate with the anger of the audience, in the same lucid state:

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretence was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one’s will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. (16)

Indeed, the Two Minutes Hate attacks the most primal fears and feelings of a human, and the reasoning behind Party's daily repetition of this tradition can be observed clearly. Yet, at the end of the Two Minutes Hate, as people are at their emotional climaxes, the image of Big Brother becomes the tipping point for the audience to collapse. One member of the audience jumps out of her chair, murmuring about Big Brother being her saviour with a trembling voice, she hides her face in her hands in a way resembling prayer (18). After her, the audience starts chanting "B-B" in a very slow rhythm and the trance-like state climaxes. Despite the fact that Winston is able to slip out of his enchantment during the session itself, thanks to the chanting for "B-B", the vast majority of the audience seems to have lost themselves in the ecstasy of the image of Big Brother. Through the tradition that the Party invented and enforced, there is a clear and distinct definition of the Other, and the unification of the society against the Other is assured. As Elsa Bouet claims, "if memories can be erased, altered and manipulated, one's memories of the Other can also be altered, used to create fear and strengthen loyalty in one's system" (41). Through traditions, the collective memory of the citizens of Oceania are replaced step-by-step with the Party's indoctrinations, and regardless of the attempts to be critical of the regime, even "the last man" can fall victim to this indoctrination in some moments, exhibiting the power of invented tradition as Hobsbawm suggests, in establishing a loyal base of support for a totalitarian regime.

The Unmistakable Party

Niculae Gheran has called George Orwell "one of the most important writers that reacted to the attacks on memory in the [modern] age" (165). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the reader encounters the absolute control of the Party over memory right at the beginning, and the extent of this control starts to manifest itself right at the beginning of the novel. Both concepts of tradition and collective memory deal with the present and future as much as they deal with the past of a society, so Orwell's Party slogan of "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (47) provides a foreshadowing of the events to follow. Yet, even earlier examples can be found in the first part of the book:

As soon as all the corrections which happened to be necessary in any particular number of *The Times* had been assembled and collated, that number would be reprinted, the original copy destroyed, and the corrected copy placed on the files in its stead. This

process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound-tracks, cartoons, photographs — to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance (42).

At this point in Chapter IV, Orwell starts to take his audience into the sophisticated methodology of the Party for being “right” all the time. Differing from the more psychological and even more provocative nature of the Two Minutes Hate and the trance-like state it manifested on the participants, here the audience observes the Party recreating the collective memory of the Oceania whenever it deems fit to do so. With the statement, “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as necessary” (42) Orwell shows the ruthlessness of the Party in order to stay “unmistakable” in the eyes of the people. Telescreens portray a society that is better in every aspect before the Revolution in Oceania on a daily basis, and “not a word of it could ever be proved or disproved” (77). As suggested by Malcolm Thorp, “by controlling the past, the Party insures that the individual has no standard of comparison, no method of judging the authenticity of human experience” (12).

The disconnection from the past for the citizens of Oceania does not only stem from the changes made within the Records Department and Winston’s Memory Hole. The Party goes to extreme lengths to portray a ghastly memory of the era before the Revolution, saying that London was “a dark, dirty, miserable place where hardly anybody had enough to eat and where hundreds and thousands of poor people had no boots on their feet and not even a roof to sleep under”, as well as “fat, ugly men with wicked faces” (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 76) when talking about capitalists before the Revolution. While these quotations above can be examples of the aggressive stance the Party takes against the days before its existence, the fact that Winston transcribes these lines into his diary from a children’s textbook falls right into Said’s argument that history is used “as a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider’s understanding of one’s country, tradition, and faith” (176), as well as Hobsbawm’s aforementioned claim that such practices are “characterized by reference to the past” (4). From a young age, the future generations of Party members are indoctrinated with falsified historical statements, everchanging statistics about the impossibility of a mistake by the Big Brother, or the Party’s governmental agencies, in order to strip them from their individual abilities to question anything beyond the lines given to them. While “proles” are simply ignored as their existence is

ostensibly much easier to control with the distractions of daily life, the members' belief in the Party, and the unquestionable leader, reinforced with traditions such as the Two Minutes Hate, brings them to a state of total illusion, with any possibility to dispel it and recognize the truth is deliberately cut off. With their collective memory deliberately destroyed, they become "a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting" (77), simple cogs in the grand machine that the Party created for its dehumanization protocol, which provides it with unchallenged authority at any given time and place.

Conclusion

Nineteen Eighty-Four uses the concepts of memory and tradition as significant parts of its narrative. Orwell's dystopian regime does not refrain from adopting all the available methods at its disposal to alter the collective memory of its society, and the alteration, even destruction of the collective memory of the society regarding the life before the Revolution is achieved in multiple ways, through language, recordkeeping, and invented traditions. As Hobsbawm and Said both suggest, these actions help to establish and support a national identity in the citizens, beyond the connections that they have individually or in smaller groups, and with the fear of the Other instilled on a regular basis, this unity evolves into unequivocal and unwavering support for Big Brother and the Party itself. Individual thoughts and memories, even the individuality itself, become subversive in the eyes of the regime, and despite the fact that Winston clearly tries his best to safeguard some of his individuality and ability to be critical of the doctrines and orthodoxy of the Party, even he is not immune to the effects of the tradition, manifestly exhibited during the Two Minutes Hate.

This tradition and its effects, alongside with the constant alteration of the statistics, articles, news and everything that is related to the actions of the Party and Big Brother, evolves into a dehumanization policy, stripping people from their individuality. The concept of destruction of individual identity is not solely explored in dystopian fiction written by Orwell. On the contrary, most of the dystopian fiction writers, such as Huxley, Zamyatin and Bradbury, integrate this loss of personal identity under a totalitarian regime into their narratives. As the loss of memory on a social scale, reinforced with traditions, inevitably leads to the loss of identity under the disguise of unification against a common enemy, against the Other, memory becomes

“not necessarily authentic, but rather useful” (Said 179) for the regime. As the 20th century was a time where ideologies and politics, alongside concepts such as traditions, customs and memory, were heavily discussed, it is only natural that dystopian fiction authors embodied their fears against totalitarian regimes that were able to twist memory and history in accordance with their needs.

According to Orwell, there were three possible outcomes for future in the year 1947, shortly before his death. The first two of these predictions, in the essay “Toward European Unity” were a war waged by the USA against the Soviet Union, and the Cold War continuing until the Soviet Union obtained atomic weapons. Yet, the third prediction rather stands apart from the other two:

That the fear inspired by the atomic bomb and other weapons yet to come will be so great that everyone will refrain from using them. This seems to me the worst possibility of all. It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast super-states, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hierarchic, with a semi-divine caste at the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phony war against rival states. Civilisations of this type might remain static for thousands of years (Orwell 371).

Considering Orwell’s power for observation, and his particular interest in memory, both individual and collective, this point of view is even more striking, as his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* simply becomes a version of his feared version of the future taken to an extreme. Whether his fears were justified by history, is very much open to debate, yet considering the popularity of the concept of memory in the twenty-first century, when more and more people are falling into the isolationist policies, it is the opinion of the author of this research that it deserves recognition, at the very least.

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