

THE SHARED CRITICISM OF *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* AND *MACBETH*

*Ayşe Başak İnci**

Throughout history, political works of literature have attempted to examine politics of a particular society the author lived in or the world politics in general. Their criticism largely include the oppressions made by ruling classes, authorities, tyrannical leaders and the defects of political systems in a country. Moreover, by providing people knowledge about the circumstances of their environment and the world, they changed the way people perceive and understand events that inevitably affect their lives. No matter how many years have passed, history repeats itself and authors, poets, playwrights etc. deal with the same issues in life continuingly. For instance, although there are three huge centuries between the times of the English poet and playwright William Shakespeare and one of the leading novelists of the 20th century English literature George Orwell, both authors harshly criticize suppressive authorities in most of their works. I argue that, being strong political works, Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* (1606) and Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) have many surprising similarities between their underlying criticisms of suppressive, tyrannical authority figures and the chaos and unnaturalness created by their rules, with the help of the shared themes of uncertainty and confusion.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Macbeth*, both Orwell and Shakespeare harshly criticize the absolutist ideology and the usurping tyrants who rule these states. Both works criticize political extremism and lawless despotism; and the underlying implication of the works is that if there is a constant and huge flaw in a ruling state, brutality and bloodshed are inevitable. According to Alan Sinfield, "The reason why the state need[s] violence and propaganda [is] that the system [is] subject to persistent structural difficulties" (122). George Orwell saw the hazards of tyrannical and totalitarian ruling systems after he experienced the Spanish civil war. He was a genuine socialist and his accomplished novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is unquestionably a warning to people all around the world about totalitarianism. Being the authoritarian tyrant of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother's [in fact the Party's] sole aim is to consciously make people work for the party and to leave them starving in terrible life conditions. Big Brother becomes the authority by demolishing human rights and the possibility for a democratic state,

* Ege Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü Öğrencisi

only for his greed for being on the top. Just like Macbeth, Big Brother “vaporizes” anyone that goes against his ideologies, anyone who talks of freedom and of better living conditions. Furthermore, they are both unlawful and violent leaders: They act like they are god-like figures, Macbeth claiming to be the divine rightful king of Scotland and the description of Big Brother is god-like, no one ever saw him but he is said to be constantly watching and he is controlling everyone. Both are despotic leaders devoted to the absolutist ideology which supports that even if the ruler is a tyrant he is unquestionable and every single act he does is legitimate. Big Brother and Macbeth have an endless greed to gain more and more just for their “vaulting ambition”. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O’Brien tells Winston, “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power” (234).

Similarly, written in the 16th century in which there was a development from Feudalism to the Absolutist state, *Macbeth* criticizes the violence exercised under the practises of Absolutist ideology. Shakespeare was aware that as long as there is a tyrant ruling the country, chaos and disorder will prevail and extend in that society. Macbeth, the usurping tyrant who has been triggered by the uncanny witches, goes astray: His passion to ascend to the throne and his evil deeds in the end cause a civil war between Scotland and England. He unjustly becomes the king by killing the legitimate and worthy King Duncan and exterminates every single person that questions his authority or threatens his monarchy even after he becomes the king. Moreover, Macbeth has no heir to ascend his throne after him: He has no other reason but his greed for doing his evil deeds. For example, in Act 4 Scene I, long after his ascend to the throne, he recklessly continues to slay those around him just to assert his place. In his last encounter with the witches, Macbeth asks questions to them to learn more about his future as a king. Then the witches send their masters as apparitions for them to answer him. The first apparition, which appears as an armed head, tells Macbeth: “Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth: beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife” (69-71). Later, the second apparition as a bloody child says: “Be bloody, bold and resolute; laugh to scorn/ The power of man, for none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth” (78-80). Here the bloody child implies that Macbeth will be slain by nobody but Macduff who was “untimely ripped” from his mother’s womb; he was considered not be born of woman. Although Macbeth does not realize the meaning of this prophecy at first, upon the first apparition’s words, he decides to murder the Macduff family for fear of a revolt against his reign: “From this moment, The very firstlings of my heart shall be/ The firstlings of my hand... The castle of Macduff I will surprise; /Seize upon Fife; give to th’edge o’th’sword/ His

wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls/ That trace him in his line” (145-152). Upon hearing the murder of Lady Macduff and the children, Macduff, who is in the English court to meet Malcolm there, decides to take revenge from Macbeth and he and the English army declare war against Scotland.

Moreover, the themes of confusion and uncertainty imply that the chaotic auras of the works are somehow the results of the deeds of the two tyrannical authority figures. In both works, even the exact dichotomies such as good and bad, black and white, true and false are mixed up in the consciousness of the characters. This integration of the opposite concepts creates the dominant tones of uncertainty and doubt and results in the chaotic environments of both of the works. For example in *Nineteen Eighty- Four*, the English Socialist Party ("INGSOC") of Oceania's worldview includes slogans consist of dichotomies such as "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength". These slogans help conducting *doublethink* and therefore controlling people and more importantly their minds. *Doublethink* makes people simultaneously accept two mutually contradictory concepts or beliefs as correct and as a result, a consciously ordered chaos and a sense of confusion prevail in the environment of the novel. This in fact helps the Party to control the masses' consciousness by invading their minds. As Homi K. Bhabha states, “*Nineteen Eighty- Four* is about the decline of ‘the good society’, tracked in the decadence and deception of doublethink, leading to a kind of controlled paranoia among its characters and readers” (31). In a dystopian world like *Nineteen Eighty- Four*, one cannot make any distinction between true and false knowledge in that people's minds are manipulated by the party. For example, Oceania is constantly in the state of war. However, people act like they live in peace because they accept the slogan “War is peace”. Even though Winston spends his days trying to assert truths about the past in his mind, the history is manipulated and changed at the behest of the Party, which is the dominant force of the work and he cannot prove anything because nobody would believe him. He struggles between his memories of the past and the manipulated records of the past which the party dictated. Winston reflects upon the contradictions of the real and altered past as:

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. (*NEF* 44)

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare constructs his work over the theme of reversal of values which results in consequent doubt, uncertainty and confusion. For example the witches introduce

Macbeth in the Act I scene I by asking unearthly questions to each other: Their first question is “Where shall we three meet again? /In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” (1-2). These very first lines of the play lead to an extraordinariness and confusion in the first scene and later in the whole play. The answer of the question comes: “When the hurly burly is done/ When the battle is lost, and won” (3-4). At the end of their uncanny and supernatural speech, the witches all together make the famous statement that will create the general atmosphere of uncertainty of the play: “Fair is foul and foul is fair/ Hover through the fog and filthy air” (12-13), which resembles one of the three famous mottos of Orwell’s Party “Ignorance is strength”. As L.C. Knights states, “[W]e hear the undertone of uncertainty: the scene opens with a question, and the second line suggests a region where the elements are disintegrated as they never are in nature; thunder and lightning are disjoined, and offered as alternatives” (Knights 132). Both the witches’ unearthly speeches and the Party’s uncanny slogans serve as invaders of people’s minds and the provokers of evil deeds which cause the destruction of good and ordered states. What’s more, this tone of uncertainty results in unnatural disorder in the characters and the society of both of the works. As Macbeth is deceived by the witches, he recognizes no moral law: He murders Duncan thus commits a crime against natural and moral order. Because in those times it was believed that the kings had unquestionable divine rights, Macbeth’s crime is the worst of all crimes and this is in fact what demolishes the order of Scotland. After the night of the murder of Duncan, Lennox says:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamenting’s heard i’ th’ air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the Earth
Was feverous and did shake. (46-53)

Because of the contradictory slogans of the Party, there is an unnatural disorder in *1984*’s Oceania as the concepts and words are perverted. For example, even though Oceania is under a totalitarian rule and there is hardly any redistribution of wealth, its economy is presented as socialism. Because war is represented as going on continuously everywhere in the world among the three powers, it is not destructive and dangerous anymore and people can do nothing to change the circumstances because their minds are shaped in the hands of the Party. Ministry of Truth re-writes history, filling the history books with lies. In Ministry of Plenty manages the

growing scarcity of goods, Ministry of Love kill and torture people in order to make them conform. Moreover, the evil-doers of both of the works are totally aware of the possible consequences of their actions and they try to hide the truth from everyone: They know that the evil which is being done is so terrible that it should be hidden from sight. Shakespeare gives this idea by using the cloaking imagery in *Macbeth*. For example, when Macbeth realizes that Malcolm, who is the rightful heir of King Duncan, will be the successor to King Duncan's throne, Macbeth immediately goes into evil plans of killing him. He cries: "Stars, hide your fires"; / "Let not light see my black and deep desires" (50-51). Similarly, in *1984* history is rewritten in order to hide the evils of the Party such as "vaporizing" people who do not conform and all the past leaders who supported and sought for freedom and better life conditions.

Moreover, the dominant ambiguity in the works result an uncertainty over whom to trust and there is the element of betrayal in the relationship of the characters. Friends become enemies; O'Brien tricks and betrays Winston by giving him the false hope for a better future in the anti-Party Brotherhood and the witches in Shakespeare's play trick Macbeth into a false sense of security. The witches represent the start of evil and anarchical deeds into orderly and good reign of King Duncan. They gain Macbeth's confidence by making predictions that actually come true, gradually making predictions by referring to him as "Thane of Cawdor" and later as "The King". Although Banquo tries to warn him to be cautious, Macbeth becomes more and more ambitious and greedy to ascend to the throne. He is deceived by the witches and he kills the worthy King Duncan in order to be the king of Scotland. Similarly, as Winston is totally deceived by the duplicitous O'Brien, who is a member of the inner party and whom Winston admires at first. He betrays Winston and Julia by tricking them telling that he is a member of the anti-Party Brotherhood. Upon believing his words, Winston confesses that he is against the Party and Big Brother and, as a result, he is tortured and his mind is manipulated in the end.

As to make a conclusion, it can be said that Shakespeare's most bloody play *Macbeth* and Orwell's bitter criticism *Nineteen Eighty-Four* observe similar issues in creating their criticisms on absolutist ideology, tyranny and despotism. Although the times and circumstances have differed through the centuries between the works, the unearthly aura of *Macbeth's* Scotland and the chaotic Oceania of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* resemble in their similar cruel and despotic ruling systems. Both works demonstrate the fact that as long as these kinds of authority figures rule a society, the miserable and oppressed life conditions will prevail. The themes of doubt, unnaturalness and destruction caused by evil deeds and the chaotic environments are

shared in these two strong political works and they show us that although times and environments change throughout years, history of politics repeats itself.

WORKS CITED

Bhabha, Homi K. "Doublespeak and Minority of One." Ed. Abbot Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005. Print.

Knights, L.C. "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?". *Explorations*, 1964, pp. 15-54.

Orwell, George. 1984. İnglaterra: Pearson Education, 2008. Print.

Sinfield, Alan. "History, Ideology and Intellectuals". *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 28, nos. 1,2, 1986, pp. 63-77.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.