



(Re)Defining the Orwellian Precarity

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ABSTRACT: *The modern world is marred by various kinds of conflicts – not just economic, political or social but also by their various off-shoots. In the age of fast technology, no doubt the world is coming closer but we are finding it more difficult to adjust to changes around us, perceiving those changes as threats and seeking protection through violence and intolerance. Ontologically humans are always caught in a situation of conflict which renders them all the more precarious. Now this precarity can be of various kinds. George Orwell who viewed the world through his lens of realism and was able to envision a world of precariousness, as we find ourselves today in, acutely defines what precarity is, through his various writings. This article is an attempt to throw light on our contemporary precarious existence alongside the Orwellian world.*

KEYWORDS: *Precarity, Orwell, precariat, economic, psychological, deprivation.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Lives are by definition precarious, they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed.”

(Judith Butler, *Frames of war: When is Life Grievable?*)

Precarity has now become a matter of crucial concern in social and political sciences and it has increasingly made its way in literary discourse. It has become a part of literary narratives in relation to its social condition of production. Precarity refers to a politically and economically induced condition wherein a subject suffers from social and economic instability comparatively more than others which may be attributed to the shortcomings of any state. A majority of the world population does not have a stable job or a steady income. Globally unemployment is on an all-time high. Precarity results from this material vulnerability resulting from economic shift in the labour market caused by global neo-liberal economic reforms and an increasing worldwide class divide gaining grounds in a relatively unstable condition of deprivation and insecurity. The neo-liberal policies, which were mostly adopted by democracies all around the world are criticised for breeding such social inequalities and for creating a new group of people collectively known as ‘the precariats’. The lack of trust in political institutions coupled with financial insecurity makes them more vulnerable to the right-wing populism and xenophobic ideas which is sweeping across the whole world, as is evident in the hardening attitude of the western governments against illegal immigrants and imposition of border controls to interdict asylum-seekers. It is also the chief reason behind the current refugee crisis triggered by systemic poverty, political upheavals, violence, disease and corruption. The bloody conflicts that are taking place all over the world in the name of legal and economic rights, religious sectarianism and regional dominance are threatening the very existence of humankind.

Something similar resonates in the works of George Orwell. Orwell was a person who was deeply rooted in the reality of his times. Orwell may himself be called a precariat. His act of leaving a high-positioned and well-paid job was a result of his psychological precarity as he felt vulnerable within the imperialistic and ecologically challenging set-up in Burma. Though Orwell belonged to a middle class family of England but he had understood the class distinction much early in his life during his days at a preparatory school at St. Cyprian’s, and after his return from Burma had literally experienced economic deprivation during his sojourn in Paris and London.

It is said that Orwell wrote “Nineteen Eighty-Four” during a period of severe illness. Its first draft reached its completion just a few days before he was shifted to a tuberculosis hospital near Glasgow. The idea of this book had come to his mind long back. Even he admitted that if he had not written it during that period of illness, the picture would not have been so grim. The seamy side of life that he presents in “Nineteen Eighty-

Four” is nothing but a reflection of his mental state he was passing through as a result of his physical degeneration.

The world of “Nineteen Eighty-Four” is divided into three groups – the Inner Party, the Outer Party and the Proles. The Inner Party comprising of very few members (just 2 percent of the total population) forms the think-tank of this society and exercises control over the 85 percent of the ‘helpless’ population of the proles who are intentionally kept under strict scarcity of food items but intoxicated by a regular supply of gin, cigarettes and pornography. The Outer Party consists of those members who work for the government but they too are kept under strict surveillance through telescreens and thought-police to prevent any act of rebellion against Big Brother. The Inner Party members have no restrictions and consume high quality products unlike the outer party members and the proles who live a life of economic dispossession and extreme depression. Orwell, too represented the economic and psychological precarity in his novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four”.

The debauching of language becomes an important weapon of tyranny in the hands of the Inner Party to suppress the masses. ‘Newspeak’ becomes the agency of limiting and restricting the voices of the people. As a result of paucity of words, expression of an idea becomes almost impossible. The language is designed to meet the ideological needs of the party. In absence of any economic security, the ‘proles’ became more susceptible to whims and manipulations of the party by indulging in two-minute hate speech and turning numb to their exploitation. Even in our contemporary times, the frames created by governments and mass media discourses create some lies which are usually taken to be more legitimate, thereby rendering truth in a more precarious state. With the fast-paced advances made by social media in the last decade, fake news which is a kind of yellow-journalism has also seen an exponential growth and its relevance has increased in post-truth politics. The following quotation aptly describes the situation- “A lie can travel around the globe while the truth is putting on its shoes”. The term fake news gained popularity after the USA President, Donald Trump posted a tweet where he talked about the negative media coverage of him. The widespread outreach of fake news and paid news are eating into the fabrics of authentic journalistic discourses. The fake news crusade, on one hand, has resulted into a riot-like situation by circulating false messages and videos on social media which often leads to political polarization.

Even in “Keep the Aspidistra Flying”, Gordon Comstock develops a cynical view of the world. Orwell is a superb writer on the theme of economic deprivation. “The effect of poverty is that it kills thought.” (Orwell, George. ‘Keep the Aspidistra Flying’, Penguin Books, p. 47) Gordon abandons jobs after jobs, tired of the machinations of the “money world”. (Ibid. p. 47) In “Down and Out in Paris and London” which is autobiographical in nature, Orwell recounts the adventures of an Englishman through the rough weathers of life. Even in the romantic city of Paris, he portrays a poor man as a worthless creature wandering on the roads. Unlike some of the poets who have eulogized poverty as a heavenly blessing, Orwell despises such ideal arguments and indirectly holds the governments responsible for this despicable evil. In yet another work of Orwell titled “The Road to Wigan Pier” the real condition of the unemployed people in the mining areas and their unaccountable tale of suffering and misery is unfolded.

Orwell was well-aware of the socio-psychological disenfranchisement that economic deprivation and uncertainty causes. Though he has made a mark as a writer who was opposed to any kind of totalitarian regime, he was someone who had personally as well as in his works experienced the precariousness associated with human life. He had foreseen and warned against the excess intrusion of technology in our lives which can be very well-experienced by a 21st century citizen of any country who is constantly under surveillance. He indirectly referred to how technology might breach into our personal spaces and isolate humans from the rest of the humankind.

The insecurities which find roots in the minds of the populace are not just material and objective but also subjective and emotional which leads one to distinguish precarity from precariousness which is, as pointed out by Butler, the inherent state of uncertainty and dependence emanating from such inequality. It is not just restricted to the realm of humans but to non-human entities as well where all become “vulnerable bodies”. The environmental precarity or environmental degradation that the entire globe is grappling with, is not just about the melting of glaciers and global warming but may in fact be one aspect of the general evolutionary crisis. Precarity, today encapsulates the entire world order we live in. It is not just restricted to global economics but post the 2007 crisis, the austerity measures taken affected all levels of society including the marginal groups. For example, social funding suffered a cut leading to visible cases of destitution, rise in crimes and drug addiction. It would be erroneous to believe that the insecurity in the labour market affected only the marginals. It extended to a class not usually associated with financial insecurity- the middle class and even the wealthy elites as they too were afflicted by uncertainty which prepared the breeding-ground for a culture of stress and pressure and the constant need to compete every day in order to guard one’s position. They too suffer from states of psychological precarity.

The kind of approach to life well-contained and depicted in the works of Orwell ensures the fundamental feature of survival. In his opinion, it is a well-cherished tenet of culture. Its pursuit must be well-

directed towards achievement of a meaningful life. No doubt Orwell fought against myriad evils of society such as indecency, injustice, inequality, oppression, class-divide, imperialism, capitalism, fascism, totalitarianism, poverty and glorification of industrialism and excessive dependence on technology in most of his writings. Unfortunately, what came within the ambit of his vision was the destruction and distortion of these cultural values. He felt like defending them as they were under attack from every quarter. His intention was to uphold the sanctity of the individual in a free culture. He observed that if a person is denied freedom of leading a meaningful life, the sanctity of the individual will be badly affected. In his opinion, even a piece of literature cannot be separated from the sanctity of the individual. Undoubtedly, he voices his concern against cultural distortion of the ideals humans should live by such as decency, equality, justice, liberty, truth and democratic socialist ideals.

Comparing the above-stated Orwellian stand to our own contemporary times, Guy Standing, a British Economist, in his book "The Precariat" highlights middle class as "the new dangerous class" which includes the affluent and educated as well as the economically marginalized, both affected by 'precaritisation'. This precaritisation is rather complex and operates on the basis of varying spatial as well as ethical dimensions. Precarity can have an upbeat side to it. As for the young, forms of precarity can be appealing as they can offer them an innovative mode of living which they view as glamorous rather than precarious. The middle class are normalising precarity. This self-precaritised group takes up working arrangements which are based on short-termism but nevertheless provide a working condition but no long term security like annual leaves, pension, superannuation, maternity leave, etc. According to Standing, "the precariat mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear". The precariat is not a victim but s/he is frustrated and hopeless and this group is very dangerous as it cannot be collectively mobilised. For example- a native worker feels threatened by a migrant worker. Precarity, though it emerges out of economic deprivations and psychological uncertainty yet it is a case study of a wide range of experiences, seclusion and depression. In our contemporary world, the risks are getting increased and the measures to atone them are getting minimised and the irony is that the precariats are billions in number and their forms continue to increase with the increase in utilitarian tendencies in global market and uncertainty in human life.

So how does one cope with these pressing demands which appear daily before us in myriad forms? Can we sustain hope and imagine radical futures even in the midst of reproducing precarious conditions? Are there any alternative ways which we may adopt to adjust to these precarious situations? Can a shift from governmentality to a culture of care to resist the structural violence? Can art, literature or innovative writing become the beacon which may help us form new solidarities and collectivities and sympathies? Some political theorists opine that accepting universal precariousness and rejecting selective precarity will lead to social activism enabling one's emancipation while others' vision analysing it from an ontological perspective under the similar conditions of violence, financial uncertainty and social exclusion. The debate on this distinct group remains unresolved yet offers opportunity for newer insights.

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