

# FROM STATE CONTROL TO DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VALUE EROSION IN *1984* AND *THE CIRCLE*

Lakshmimol C.P.\* and Dr. Joji John Panicker\*\*

## Abstract

This study conducts a comparative literary analysis of George Orwell's *1984* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* to examine the systematic erosion of fundamental human values through institutional and technological power structures. With a methodological framework incorporating value systems theory, literary-digital analysis, and theoretical perspectives of post-truth, the analysis, in particular, inspects the change of three fundamental human values such as authenticity, privacy, and natural interpersonal relations. The research demonstrates a significant paradigm shift from state-mandated authoritarian oppression to corporate-digital exploitation, where individuals voluntarily relinquish essential values through technological mediation. Through comparative narrative techniques and close textual analysis, the exploration unveils how these literary works, regardless of their temporal separation, shed light on similar apparatuses of value degradation functioning via diverse control structures. The findings indicate that contemporary digital surveillance and social media platforms mirror and amplify the dystopian warnings presented in both literary works, albeit through more subtle and participatory means. In addition, the study reveals how technological structures methodically restructure moral hierarchies, leading to a standardized approval of the invasion of privacy and the commercialization of human knowledge. This research contributes to the growing discourse on digital ethics and human values by providing a literary-theoretical framework for

\*Senior Research Scholar, Department of English, CMS College Kottayam (Autonomous), Kottayam, Kerala – 686001 Email id: [lakshmimolcp@gmail.com](mailto:lakshmimolcp@gmail.com).

\*\*Department of English, CMS College Kottayam (Autonomous), Kottayam, Kerala – 686001 Email id: [jojipanner@gmail.com](mailto:jojipanner@gmail.com)

understanding value erosion in modern digital society. The analysis surmises that these texts work as vital cautionary tales, providing perspectives on the intricate interface connecting technological progress and the system of human values while highlighting the critical need for upholding primary human values in a progressively digitized milieu. The implications extend beyond literary analysis thus inform contemporary debates about digital privacy, authenticity, and human agency in the age of omnipresent technology.

**Keywords:** Digital surveillance, Human Values, Dystopian literature, Technological mediation, Privacy ethics

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital arena, where technological progress and proliferation of information incessantly destabilise essential human values, literary works appear as a significant investigative lens for having a perspective regarding the methodical erosion of ethical structures. This investigation embarks on a comparative study of the dystopian masterpiece *1984* by George Orwell and the contemporary novel *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, exploring how different authority frameworks, such as state-controlled despotism in opposition to surveillance by corporate-digital systems, essentially change and challenge universal human values, which “are are abstract and context-independent beliefs about what people want to achieve in life” (Kesberg and Keller 1.)

By probing these influential literary works, the research examines the apparatuses by which institutional and technological structures increasingly dismantle foundational human values; as “the interaction between values and technology needs to be much more carefully navigated than before”(Baldi 61).The study centres on three critical realms of ethical dissolution, which are the methodical deconstruction of authentic individual expression and ethics, the intended attrition of privacy as an unchallengeable human right and finally the technological intervention in authentic human interactions.

With a refined interdisciplinary strategy, this investigation goes beyond conventional literary analysis, providing insightful perceptions regarding the multifaceted exchanges between technological developments, institutional authority, and personal agency. By interrogating how these tales symbolise the ongoing transformation of universal human values, as “society’s perception of personal values and morals has undergone a significant transformation” (Goldstein).

The study enlightens the understated hitherto invasive mechanisms via which present-day institutional and technological systems discuss, manoeuvre, and potentially restructure fundamental human ethical doctrines.

The methodology of comparative analysis enables an examination of how diverse authority paradigms, such as state-controlled versus corporate-digital controlled, deliberately interfere in and redesign personal and shared value structures, offering a critical perceptive of the continuing transformation of human principles in a progressively digitised and interrelated global environment.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Value Systems Theory offers an essential lens for probing how cultures erect and preserve ethical structures amidst extensive social and technological transformations. Using this theoretical framework, the analysis investigates the intricate relations involving globalisation, digital technologies and value systems. The study examines how digital technologies challenge and shred traditional collective values while concurrently assisting in commercialising human relations and individual data. By incorporating Literary-Digital Theory and post-truth theory, the analysis unveils how present-day value structures are enthusiastically restructured, negotiated, and recreated in an overtly interrelated and technologically interceded global background, where the borders between personal principles, technological power, and social standards become gradually more fluid and intricate.

## 3. Methodology

This study utilises a value-focused methodological framework to scrutinise the attrition and metamorphosis of universal human values across Orwell's *1984* and Eggers' *The Circle*. Using this systematic textual examination, the study maps critical occurrences regarding conflict of value and degeneration while using comparative discourse investigation to reflect how different power structures, such as state control to corporate-digital authority, affect and influence essential human values. The methodology integrates the extensive study of the evolution of the value system, providing a refined perspective of how established human values change under diverse apparatuses of societal control. This strategy facilitates a broad assessment of value transformation from state-regulated paradigms to the current corporate-digital environment.

#### 4. Analysis of *1984*

Orwell's *1984* showcases how tyrannous structures methodically destroy fundamental human values through distinctive but interrelated apparatuses. The Party controls the citizens of Oceania via a combination of terror, surveillance, and misinformation, and the Party can arbitrarily employ torture, incarceration, or vaporization on anybody whose thinking or behaviour indicates that they may cause an offence in the future. Citizens are relentlessly under surveillance as the "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 4); thus, all live in terror.

The attrition of authenticity is expressed through the careful regulation of language by the state, where authentic and free self-expression is prohibited and linguistically unattainable through "Newspeak words" (16). One of the fundamental points in *1984* is that language is essential to human thought since it composes and confines the ideas that people are competent of creating and conveying. The three slogan of the Party; "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength" (6) implies that even "slogans and captions are considered a form of control" (Abdu and Khafaga 425). Individuals' truth and reality experience is systematically crushed under the mighty unquestionable institutional truth by "The Ministry of Truth" (Orwell 6). Identities of individuals are trampled with continuous emotional manipulation and "DOUBLETHINK" (270). And "DOUBLETHINK lies at the very heart of Ingsoc, since the essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty" (270).

Along with this, privacy becomes a dream as it is wholly decimated through a carefully devised surveillance arrangement that normalises it as an indispensable feature of social management. By employing telescreens and secret microphones in every corner of the city, the Party is capable of observing its subjects around the clock. This is perceived as ethically sound but facilitates a very diabolical malevolence. Surpassing the realm of physical surveillance, the destruction extends beyond the dominion of private thoughts. The Thought Police "watched everybody all the time" (5). The sanctuary of the individual mind turns into a battlefield for state regulation. The Party bombards its members with mental stimuli intended to overpower the capacity of the mind for free and independent thought and reflection. The huge telescreen in all citizens' space disseminates a persistent flow of propaganda or party lines. Both bodily and psychological personal spaces are distorted into state

authority trappings, eradicating the notion of individual boundaries. Upon having a love relationship, “Winston and Julia have been arrested by the Thought Police and sent to the Ministry of Love, Room 101”(Abass 50), erasing every periphery of privacy and personal interaction.

This particular literary work craftily unveils how human interaction endures methodical degradation, as legitimate human relations are systematically destabilised and also “undermines the solidarity of the family” (Orwell 272), thus substituting it by institutional allegiance. The Party challenges and demoralises family structure by inducting and instructing children into a group called the Spies (27), which persuades and promotes them to spy even on their parents for possible deviation of thought and action. Familial relationships, formerly considered the foundation stone of human civilisation, are restructured as apparatuses for state directives, “family had become in effect an extension of the Thought Police. It was a device by means of which everyone could be surrounded night and day by informers who knew him intimately” (168). Even as love is distorted into a means for treachery, as epitomised in the catastrophic relationship between Winston and Julia, as soon as they start to be occupied with each other, their “process of life” (189) becomes endurable for them. Their relationship portrays human beings’ delicate yet natural character to connect and communicate with each other.

The systematic and organised corrosion of these universal human values portrayed in *1984* jarringly foretells present-day challenges in the digitised planet, where institutional authority, whether exercised by the state or corporate systems, persists in intimidating and terrorising fundamental characteristics of human understanding, such as “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies” (44).

The parallels discernible between the dystopian vision of Orwell and our contemporary reality emphasise the critical significance of understanding and reflecting on these means and methods of value erosion; only by identifying and enthusiastically opposing these patterns can humanity expect to conserve human dignity and genuine relationships in an age where technology increasingly intercede the human existence.

## 5. Analysis of *The Circle*

In *The Circle*, Eggers satirises the society and values that have materialised in the era of the Internet. Mae Holland gets a job at the Circle, the most influential tech company in the world, through the

connections of her friend Annie. The corporate company established by three “Wise Men” (Eggers 47) has formed “TruYou” (11); it is an integrated online identity that combines all private, public, and professional information of individuals. The mission of Circle is to build a further transparent and proficient culture by increasing its technological accomplishments, executing extensive surveillance, and accumulating complete information regarding all facets of life.

It proffers a critical exploration of how digital platforms methodically transform and frequently demoralise fundamental human values, predominantly focusing on privacy, authenticity, and human relationships. As Sellen et al., states that the human values in the digital era declare the “end of the ephemeral” (Sellen et al. 95) as one of the main transformations in how we connect to technology, which “requires a certain level of participation” (95).

In this digital period, humanity can witness a drastic transformation of many aspects of human life, including human values, particularly privacy, authenticity, and human relationships. Privacy was previously deemed an unchallengeable human right, which has been methodically redesigned into a marketable product. It can be traded, sold, and demoralised. One of the critical reasons Mae becomes victim to the Circle’s tactics to smother the privacy of other human beings is because of the additional attention and validation she gets in her online career. It is stimulating and representative of how technological progress and the extra attention it offers can be tantalising for the younger generation and their exploration of individuality. In the novel, Mae becomes more loyal to her Internet followers, or “watchers” (Eggers 11), than to her real friend Annie Allerton. The termination of individual boundaries has become normalised during continuous digital exposure. The operating system “TruYou” (11) collects private data for commercial profit and showcases the loss of privacy. Individual privacy, formerly considered an innate human necessity, is currently perceived as distrustful and disruptive behaviour; it is considered “privacy is theft” (163). This destruction of privacy interweaves intensely with the change of authenticity in contemporary digital culture.

Human identity and individuality have suffered a fundamental shift from authentic self-expression to vigilantly curated and performative digital exhibitions, where individual significance is considered and calculated with quantifiable metrics such as the number of likes, shares, and online engagement statistics. In the novel, “Mae gets immense power of her audience, guaranteed stratospheric Conversion Rates and Retail Raws, and ensured she was always in the top ten” (167). What were previously real, genuine,

spontaneous moments of life are now systematically calculated artificial experiences intended principally for digital engagement, use and validation. Netizens consider that if “you’re being watched, you are your better self” (160). It creates “unnaturally extreme social needs” (72) and “It improves nothing. It’s not nourishing” (72).

The “erosion of human connection is equally troubling” (“The Erosion of Human Connection in the Digital Age.”). The nature of the relationship between human beings has primarily altered. Everyday face-to-face interactions, distinguished by physical attendance and direct emotional communication, have fundamentally given way to interactions mediated by digital platforms or “going transparent” (Eggers 177). Even the most personal and cherished aspects of human relations, such as compassion and emotional profundity, are condensed to quantifiable metrics and can be tracked, calculated, and interpreted accordingly. Mae loses her genuine human connection to Annie after she becomes transparent since Mae’s watchers always meditate on it. The tale suggests that technological advancements can generate enormous fissures in human relations by substituting authentic face-to-face communication with carefully curated online representations of individuals. Mae loses her natural human ability to sustain dynamic, genuine interactions since her whole existence and reality are mediating and interceding through her phone, computer and webcam.

Social relationships and acquaintances, traditionally developed through shared physical familiarity and unmediated personal communications, have been changed into network associations, where the number of digital touchpoints frequently takes preference over the value of authentic human relations. “Social media has conditioned individuals, akin to Skinner’s pigeons, who seek validation from others, often without acknowledgement in return” (Kumar 41). By the end of the novel, Mae realises she has “not reached her parents in a few months now” (Eggers 263), and on seeing the working of Annie’s mind on screen, “Mae reached out to touch her forehead, marvelling at the distance this flesh put between them” (263). This methodical modernisation of foundational human values symbolises a shift to technology and a cardinal reimagining of what it means to be human in an ever more digitised globe.

## 6. Comparative Analysis

The metamorphosis of universal human values from Orwell’s *1984* to Eggers’ *The Circle* characterises a profound change in how collective



control apparatuses function, moving from domineering oppression to chosen submission. The state brutally stripped away fundamental human values through explicit force in *1984*. Conversely, *The Circle* portrays a world where individuals willingly surrender these same human values for digital connection and validation. *The Circle* “illuminates the ubiquitous social media trap that ensnares individuals, compelling them to partake in a relentless competition devoid of genuine substance. The quest to outshine others is fueled by the allure of imaginary rewards, such as the acquisition of social media metrics that lack intrinsic value” (Kumar 41).

This development is mainly remarkable in the sphere of privacy, where the evolution changes from the vicious seizure of individual freedom to its enthusiastic giving up as a substitute for social prevalence and superficial belonging. The mutation of authenticity pursues a comparable pattern; however, it is expressed differently. In *1984*, there was an explicit forbidding of authentic self-expression, as “the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought” (Orwell 67) or “to make communication, exchange of ideas, preservation of knowledge, and exchange of human emotions impossible, or at the very least very difficult” (Reznikov 56). In Eggers’ tale, the *Circle* damaged it by converting authenticity into a cautiously strategised digital presentation, where being genuine becomes ironically synthetic.

The transformation of human relationships portrayed across these literary texts discloses a similarly troubling development. The characters seem “to the outside world, utterly serene and even cheerful” (Eggers 173), but in their mind, “all war chaos” (173). In *1984*, time-honoured relationships, regulated by stringent state supervision and order, developed into platform-mediated communications in *The Circle*, where engagement metrics and algorithms characterise the value and significance of relations. “Human values serve as the basis for interpersonal interactions” (Arginbekova et al. 2276). However, personal relations and acquaintances experience a more disturbing transformation, changing from being tools of state rule to being commercialised as content for business turnover and social media utilisation. Moreover, the “changes of our way of life due to technology imply a reorientation of the knowledge and interests that guide our behaviours” (Baldi 52).

The foundation of society itself develops from being aggressively oppressed by state power to being deviously restructured via digital filters and algorithmic curation. The makeover of individual identity and self-expression across these tales is the most intense. In



1984 identity is openly controlled and regulated by state narratives and Thought police, and to an extent, Winston's insanity becomes "a strategy of resistance" (Wanner 54) so he can indeed be himself. Self-expression, even in a private diary or monologue in mind, is controlled. *The Circle* portrays a world where personal identity becomes a digital construct validated by social media, incessantly created and restyled by public validation through likes and shares.

Self-expression's nature experiences a contradictory inversion, from forbidden in *1984* to relentlessly essential, hitherto inauthentic in *The Circle*. Individual independence is blatantly oppressed through brutality and terror in Orwell's prophetic vision. In Eggers' modern dystopia, dismantling individual liberty is more understated but similarly effective through social demands and technological enslavement. This progress in control apparatuses embodies a shift in process and shows a profound change in how control structures work in the contemporary digital era.

## 7. Conclusion

The comparative study of *1984* and *The Circle* uncovers a sweeping evolution in how universal human values face attrition in digital times. On the contrary to absolute overt obliteration, core human values suffer clever and precise redefinition as conventional structures surrender to digital-centric options, primarily reinterpreting human knowledge, thus "robbing people the opportunities they fought for" (Werlin 4). In reaction to this change, innovative forms of confrontation and conservation emerge, with individuals and societies developing tactical strategies to shield established human values. These comprise deliberate digital detox performances, shared efforts to uphold authentic associations in digital environments, and thoughtful focus on authentic self-expression amid algorithmic demands.

The study categorically draws attention to the pressing need to preserve core human values as technology progresses, with literary creations providing a vital forewarning structure for distinguishing and comprehending value corrosion in digital culture. Inculcating "human values while using these technologies is the need of the hour" (Jonathan). Safeguarding universal human values insists equally on individual watchfulness and systemic transformation, entailing deliberate attempts at individual and public levels. Whereas both literary texts utilise diverse narratives to demonstrate means and methods of erosion of values, they intersect on a particular,

critical warning, and it is the impending slaughter of primary human characters in the face of dominating systematic control, whether forced by state power or arbitrated through technological or social media platforms.

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