



## “THE SHIFT FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL CONTROL IN DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES”

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### Abstract

Dystopian literature has traditionally examined systems of power through visible forms of oppression such as surveillance, state authority, and institutional violence. However, many dystopian narratives increasingly suggest that control becomes most effective when it is internalised by individuals themselves. This paper explores the shift from external coercion to internalised control in dystopian fiction, focusing on how fear, habit, and belief function as interconnected mechanisms of domination. The study argues that fear initiates obedience, habit normalises compliance, and belief transforms imposed structures into personal convictions, allowing power to operate with minimal external enforcement. Rather than treating dystopia as prediction, the paper positions it as a critical framework for examining enduring patterns of power, highlighting the genre's continued relevance in encouraging reflection on subtle and often unnoticed forms of control.

**Key words:** Dystopian literature, internalised control, fear, habit, and belief, psychological dystopia, normalisation of power

### Introduction

The dystopian genre occupies a critical position in literary studies as a form that interrogates social, political, and ideological problems often ignored or normalised within everyday life. Over the past century, dystopian literature has increasingly addressed conditions in which societies become either fearful of questioning authority or complacent within oppressive structures. Historical catastrophes such as the World Wars intensified these concerns, bringing dystopian narratives into sharper focus. Beyond specific events, entrenched social structures such as patriarchy, hierarchy, and racial discrimination that have also contributed to the emergence and persistence of dystopian thought, revealing control as a fundamental feature of such societies.

While early dystopian narratives often foregrounded external mechanisms of domination such as state authority, institutional violence, surveillance, and coercive governance, the later works increasingly turn inward to examine how control operates at the psychological level. What may appear as

external oppression is frequently sustained by the internalisation of ideology, fear, conformity, and identity regulation among the masses themselves. Dystopian literature has progressively shifted from depicting overt systems of repression to exploring subtler forms of internalised control, in which belief systems, conditioning, and self-regulation become the most effective instruments of domination. This paper examines this shift, arguing that internal control has emerged as a defining feature of modern dystopian narratives.

### Objectives of the Study

- To examine how dystopian literature represents systems of power through both external and internal forms of control.
- To analyse the progressive shift from overt coercion to internalised mechanisms of domination through fear, habit, and belief.
- To explore how psychological and ideological control operates within dystopian narratives beyond visible state oppression.



- To highlight the continued relevance of dystopian fiction as a critical framework for understanding subtle forms of power and compliance.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach to the analysis of dystopian literature. The present study is based on close textual reading and thematic interpretation of selected dystopian narratives to examine representations of power and control. Particular attention is given to psychological and ideological mechanisms such as fear, habit, and belief. The analysis is supported by relevant critical perspectives on dystopia and power. The approach remains literary and conceptual rather than empirical or sociological.

### **Discussion**

The external control is clearly visible in many classical dystopian novels. For instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), talks about the subjugation of women's bodily rights by the Republic of Gilead. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) discuss about surveillance and loss of freedom. *Animal Farm* (1945) although satirize but talks of the double standards of the governing bodies and many dystopian novels talk of external control. This includes state authority, punishment through force, visible coercion and surveillance. State authority imposes themselves over the masses, where the individual doesn't have the right to use their free will but submit to them. Totalitarian regimes are the ones responsible for the external control. The regime sets up an authoritarian system where the masses couldn't do much as if they were to resist, they'd be punished, conditioned moreover be threatened for their life. This brings us to institutional violence that the regime practices. In majority of the dystopian novels there are many instances where an individual is punished for going off against the governing bodies. This leads to either death or the submission of the individual to the authority where he no more questions the regime but submits.

State authority is a major contributor to a dystopian fictional world. Its presence constitutes towards the surveillance of the citizens where the authorities impose their imperialistic tendencies with the masses being aware or unaware of it. The state rewards for good and punishes for the bad tendencies. Its sole purpose is to stay in power and run their governance without worrying about any consequences. This is where surveillance becomes another major contributor as the authorities are equipped with a number of gadgets and facilities to monitor the movements or any conspiracies that might be taking place if went unnoticed, thus giving people minimal to no opportunity to go against them. The authorities after surveillance have a separate ministry to deal with the conspirators or the ones who don't bend down to the system, to punish them. All of these are the external controlling tools of a dystopian fictional world.

### **External Control in Classical Dystopian Novels**

External control is a defining characteristic of many classical dystopian narratives, where oppression is exercised through visible and institutional mechanisms of power. In such fictional worlds, authority is imposed externally through state control, surveillance, coercion, and punishment. The governing regime establishes an authoritarian system in which individual agency is severely restricted, and citizens are compelled to submit to imposed norms and ideologies. Resistance to this system is met with punishment, conditioning, or the threat of death, ensuring obedience through fear. As a result, the individual is left with little or no scope for exercising free will, and dissent becomes both dangerous and futile.

State authority functions as the primary instrument through which external control is maintained. The regime asserts dominance by regulating behaviour, rewarding conformity, and penalising deviation. Surveillance becomes a crucial mechanism within this structure, as authorities employ institutional and technological means to monitor citizens, detect dissent, and prevent organised resistance. In



many dystopian narratives, specialised institutions or ministries are tasked with identifying and punishing those who challenge the system, reinforcing the presence of institutional violence. Through these mechanisms, individuals who oppose the governing bodies are either eliminated or forced into submission, ultimately abandoning critical thought and accepting the authority of the state. These mechanisms of external control are clearly illustrated in several canonical dystopian texts. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, depicts the systematic subjugation of women's bodily autonomy under the theocratic rule of the Republic of Gilead. George Orwell's *1984*, foregrounds constant surveillance, ideological enforcement, and the complete erosion of individual freedom under a totalitarian regime. Another canonical work by Orwell is *Animal Farm*, though satirical in form, exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of ruling authorities, demonstrating how power is consolidated and maintained through manipulation and coercion. Together, these works exemplify how external control operates as a foundational mechanism in classical dystopian fiction.

#### **From External Force to Internal Consent**

While classical dystopian narratives foreground visible mechanisms of domination such as state authority, surveillance, and institutional violence, these overt forms of control do not fully explain the endurance of oppressive systems. Over time, dystopian literature increasingly suggests that power becomes most effective not when it relies solely on force, but when it is accepted, internalised, and normalised by those it governs. This shift in emphasis marks a movement away from coercion toward consent, where obedience is sustained through ideology, habit, and belief rather than constant physical repression. Understanding this transition is essential for examining how dystopian control evolves from external enforcement to internal compliance. While we talk about power, of how it becomes effective, it is not imposed solely through force but rather it is effective when internalised by

individuals themselves. But to begin the very question is how would one be controlled internally rather than externally? This is when tools as fear, belief and habit work. The initiation begins when an individual questions the very existence of the governance. The authority knows that the individual who were to oppose would motivate others leading to agitation to movements that would become the downfall of the authority. Fear, here becomes not an external factor but an internal controlling mechanism. Blatant force from the outside would be an obvious move to which people are bound to raise voice, thus creating a movement against the authority. Margaret Atwood highlights this fact as

“Yes, Ma'am, I said. Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha....Yes, Ma'am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands.”(Atwood 14)

In this passage from *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's fear operates not through immediate physical violence but through anticipation and self-regulation. The threat of punishment is implicit rather than enacted, yet it is sufficient to discipline her behaviour. Offred monitors her own speech instinctively, correcting herself even after being reprimanded. The line, “*I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll,*” (Atwood 14) powerfully illustrates how fear erases individuality and mechanises human behaviour. Her voice becomes automated, stripped of emotion and agency, reflecting the internalisation of control.

This moment demonstrates how self-censorship becomes habitual in dystopian societies. Offred adjusts her conduct not because violence is occurring, but because it remains a constant possibility. Fear, therefore, functions without



force where punishment does not need to be exercised to be effective, as the anticipation of violence is enough to produce obedience. In this way, the regime's power is sustained through internalised fear rather than continuous external coercion, revealing how control is most effective when individuals discipline themselves.

#### **Transition from fear to habit**

While fear initiates obedience by making punishment imaginable, dystopian narratives increasingly suggest that sustained control depends less on constant intimidation and more on repetition. Over time, behaviours initially shaped by fear become routine, habitual, and unquestioned. What begins as conscious self-censorship gradually transforms into automatic compliance, where individuals no longer perceive their actions as imposed but as normal. This transition from fear to habit marks a crucial stage in the internalisation of control, as power becomes embedded in everyday practices rather than enforced through overt threat.

In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley presents a society in which control is sustained not through fear alone but through habitual conditioning beginning in early childhood. From birth, individuals are trained to associate discomfort and anxiety with objects and ideas the state deems undesirable. In the conditioning centre, infants are subjected to loud noises and electric shocks to create an instinctive aversion to books and nature. This process ensures that rejection of independent thought and natural emotion becomes automatic rather than consciously chosen.

“The Head Nurse, who was standing by a switchboard at the other end of the room, pressed down a little lever. There was a violent explosion. Shriller and ever shriller, a siren shrieked. Alarm bells maddeningly sounded. The children started, screamed; their faces were distorted with terror. ‘And now,’ the Director shouted (for the noise was deafening), ‘now we proceed to rub in

the lesson with a mild electric shock.’”(Huxley 16)

Habit, therefore, operates as a powerful mechanism of control. Through constant repetition and association, obedience becomes routine, and resistance becomes inconceivable. The citizens of the World State do not rebel because they have never learned how to think outside the habits imposed upon them. Control succeeds not because individuals are threatened, but because their beliefs and behaviours have been shaped long before they are capable of questioning authority.

#### **Transition from habit to belief**

What begins as habit gradually turns into conviction. With time, behaviours shaped through repeated conditioning no longer feel imposed from outside but are accepted as natural. These habits settle into belief systems that individuals come to internalise and defend as their own.

“I’m really awfully glad I’m Beta, because I don’t work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid. They all wear green, and Delta children wear khaki. Oh no, I don’t want to play with Delta children.”(Huxley 22,23)

This conditioning extends beyond physical reactions to the internalisation of social hierarchy. Children are repeatedly taught to identify themselves with their caste and to regard other castes as inferior, as seen in the casual acceptance of class distinctions among the Betas, Gammas, and Deltas. These attitudes are not enforced through punishment but through repetition, making hierarchy feel natural and unquestionable. As the Director explains, these lessons are repeated hundreds of times over several months until they are fully embedded in the subconscious.

“They’ll have that repeated forty or fifty times more before they wake; then again on Thursday, and again on Saturday. A hundred and twenty times three times a week for thirty months. After which they go on to a more advanced lesson.”(Huxley 23)



What once operated as external control gradually transforms into an internalised process that the masses learn to accept and normalise. Through repetition, conditioning, and routine, power no longer needs to assert itself through overt force. Instead, control functions through normalisation, where imposed behaviours and beliefs are internalised and sustained by individuals themselves. In this way, dystopian societies reveal a crucial shift from authority enforced by coercion to domination maintained through consent.

While fear initiates obedience and habit sustains it through repetition, dystopian narratives ultimately reveal belief as the most enduring form of control. Once external discipline and routine are internalised, individuals begin to construct ideological justifications that make domination appear natural, necessary, or even virtuous. At this stage, power no longer depends on surveillance or punishment; it is upheld by the subject's own convictions. Psychological dystopias make this shift especially visible, as control operates from within the individual rather than being imposed from outside.

“It occurred to me then, as it has before, that that is what men are really \_for\_ . Both sexes can do one thing specially well; women can give birth and men can kill. We - I consider myself an honorary man - are the harder sex. We strike out, push through, thrust and take.”(Banks 98)

In *The Wasp Factory*, by Ian Banks, the statement reveals Frank's deeply internalised and distorted belief system, where violence is not only normalised but framed as a natural and essential male function. By biologizing aggression and equating masculinity with domination, Frank constructs an ideology that justifies cruelty without the need for external authority or punishment. His self-identification as an “honorary man” further exposes how identity itself becomes a mechanism of internal control, allowing violence to be rationalised as purpose rather than questioned as moral transgression. In this way, the novel

demonstrates how belief can replace fear or force as the primary regulator of behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

In some dystopian narratives, this internalisation extends even to the regulation of the body itself, suggesting that control ultimately reaches the biological level. More broadly, dystopian literature invites readers to reflect on contemporary conditions shaped by rapid social and technological change. In an increasingly mediated world, questions arise about whether individuals gradually become accustomed to dominant belief systems without fully recognising their implications. Technological developments such as mobile communication, the pervasive use of the internet, and emerging forms of artificial intelligence often function as layers of convenience and normalisation, potentially obscuring deeper structures of control.

Practices that once generated fear or suspicion may, over time, become integrated into everyday life. As anxiety diminishes, repetition transforms these practices into routines, and routines into habits. Dystopian narratives repeatedly warn that such processes allow external mechanisms of control to evolve into internal submission, where individuals no longer feel coerced but instead participate willingly in systems that shape their thoughts and behaviour. In this way, the dystopian genre offers a critical framework for understanding how fear, habit, and belief operate together to sustain power, making domination appear ordinary, necessary, or even invisible.

Dystopian literature functions as a critical lens through which enduring structures of power can be examined. By tracing the shift from external control to internalised submission through fear, habit, and belief, this study shows how domination becomes most effective when it is normalised and self-sustaining. The narratives discussed reveal that the most dangerous form of control is not overt coercion, but the quiet erosion of agency that occurs when individuals begin to accept domination as natural. In this way, dystopian fiction remains relevant not as



prediction, but as a means of reflection and critical awareness.

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