

Unveiling George Orwell through a Critical Race Theory Feminist Lens: A Social Constructivist Approach

Natalia C. Giordana, Caffarone Klausen

Abstract: *This study reinterprets George Orwell's works through the combined perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and feminist theory within a social constructivist framework. It explores Orwell's critique of imperialism, class, and authoritarianism while highlighting the limitations in his engagement with race and gender. The analysis offers new insights into how Orwell's narratives reflect and interact with societal constructs of his time and the present.*

Keywords: Orwell, Critical Race Theory, feminism, social constructivism, literature analysis

1. Introduction

George Orwell, a seminal figure in 20th-century literature, is widely celebrated for his incisive critiques of totalitarianism and his advocacy for social justice. However, a closer inspection of his works through a Critical Race Theory feminist lens reveals a complex interplay among power dynamics related to race, gender, and class. This paper adopts a social constructivist approach to deconstructing these elements, examining how they are shaped by the socio-political contexts of Orwell's time and our present day.

This paper aims to examine the works of George Orwell through Critical Race and feminist lenses, applying a social constructivist approach to uncover nuanced insights into his treatment of race, gender, and power dynamics. While Orwell is celebrated for his critiques of totalitarianism and social injustices, applying CRT and feminist perspectives uncovers additional layers of meaning, revealing the intricate interplay of race, gender, and class in his narratives.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on Orwell's relevance by offering new perspectives on his narratives. By integrating CRT and feminist theories, the paper encourages readers to revisit Orwell's works through a more inclusive and intersectional lens.

Social constructivism posits that knowledge and meaning are not inherent but constructed through social interactions, cultural norms, and historical contexts. This approach emphasizes the role of language, discourse, and power in shaping our understanding of reality. Applying social constructivism to George Orwell's works provides a nuanced lens to explore how Orwell constructs and deconstructs societal norms, power structures, and individual identities.

2. Literature Review of George Orwell Through a Critical Race Theory Feminist Lens

Examining George Orwell's work through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) Feminist lens provides a unique perspective on his treatment of race, gender, and power dynamics. Orwell, known primarily for his critiques of totalitarianism and class oppression, often engaged with issues of identity, though not

always in ways that align with modern understandings of intersectionality or systemic inequality. This review explores how Orwell's works reflect and, at times, challenge dominant racial and gender ideologies while also highlighting their limitations.

1) Race and Imperialism in Orwell's Work

Orwell's opposition to imperialism is a central theme in his work, particularly in texts like "Burmese Days" (1934) and the essay "Shooting an Elephant" (1936). From a CRT perspective, these works can be analyzed for their critique of colonialism and the racial hierarchies it sustains. In "Burmese Days", Orwell portrays the moral corruption of the British colonialists and the dehumanizing effects of racism. The novel's protagonist, John Flory, is disillusioned with imperialism, but his complex relationship with the Burmese people and his complicity in the racist system reveal the entrenched nature of colonial power.

Critical Race Theory would highlight how Orwell still operates within a Eurocentric framework despite his critique of colonialism. His works often fail to centre the voices and perspectives of the colonized people, instead focusing on the moral dilemmas of the colonizers. This can be seen as a limitation in his ability to comprehensively deconstruct the racialized power structures he critiques.

2) Gender Dynamics and Feminist Critique

Orwell's treatment of women and gender is often fraught with contradiction. Feminist scholars have noted that his novels frequently portray women in stereotypical or reductive ways. In "1984" (1949), Julia is initially depicted as a sexual object and a vessel for Winston's rebellion, rather than a fully developed character with her agency. Her rebellion is portrayed as hedonistic and shallow compared to Winston's intellectual resistance, reflecting a gendered hierarchy that marginalizes female perspectives.

Feminist critics argue that Orwell's portrayal of women often reinforces patriarchal norms. For instance, in "Keep the Aspidochelone Flying" (1936), the protagonist Gordon Comstock's disdain for conventional life includes a disdain for women, whom he sees as embodiments of the materialistic values he rejects. Orwell's female characters are often confined to traditional roles, serving as either the moral compass or the downfall of the male protagonists.

Applying a feminist lens reveals that Orwell's work, while critical of authoritarianism, does not extend this critique to the patriarchal structures within society. The lack of intersectionality in his analysis means that issues of gender and race are often secondary to his focus on class and political oppression.

3) Intersectionality and the Limitations of Orwell's Social Critique

Intersectionality, a key concept in CRT and feminist theory, refers to how various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, and class, overlap and intersect. Orwell's work primarily addresses class struggle and political repression but often overlooks how race and gender intersect with these issues.

In "Down and Out in Paris and London" (1933), Orwell's exploration of poverty highlights the struggles of the working class. However, it largely ignores how racial and gendered identities complicate these experiences. The text's focus is almost exclusively on white male experiences of poverty, missing an opportunity to address how women and people of colour face distinct forms of marginalization.

Critical Race Theory and feminist analysis would critique Orwell's tendency to universalize the experiences of white male protagonists. This approach often erases the specific struggles of marginalized groups, leading to a partial critique of power that fails to account for the full complexity of social injustice.

Analyzing George Orwell's work through a Critical Race Theory Feminist lens reveals his social critique's strengths and limitations. While Orwell was a sharp critic of imperialism, totalitarianism, and class oppression, his analysis often falls short when it comes to addressing the intersections of race and gender. His works provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of power and control, but they also reflect the biases of his time, particularly in their portrayal of women and racial others.

A CRT Feminist reading encourages us to reconsider Orwell's legacy, recognizing the importance of his contributions and questioning his work's omissions and biases. It suggests that while Orwell was ahead of his time in many respects, a more inclusive and intersectional approach is necessary to understand and address the dynamics of power fully he sought to critique.

3. Theoretical Framework of Social Constructivism

1) Key Concepts

- Social Interaction: The process through which people interact and negotiate meanings and realities.
- Cultural Norms: Shared expectations and rules that guide people's behaviour within social groups.
- Discourse: Systems of representation that define and produce the objects of our knowledge.
- Power: The ability to control or influence the construction of knowledge and societal norms.

2) Influential Theorists:

Lev Vygotsky: Emphasized the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann: Their seminal work, "The Social Construction of Reality," posits that all knowledge, including the most basic, is derived from and maintained by social interactions.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

- 1) Critical Race Theory (CRT): From legal studies, CRT examines how race and racism intersect with other forms of social stratification. Key concepts include intersectionality, racialization, and the critique of liberalism's purported neutrality.
- 2) Feminist Theory: This perspective interrogates gender inequalities and seeks to understand how gender and patriarchy shape societal structures and individual experiences. Feminist literary criticism explores themes such as the representation of women, gendered power relations, and the intersection of gender with other social categories.
- 3) Social Constructivism: This theory posits that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions and cultural norms. It emphasizes the role of language, discourse, and power in shaping our understanding of reality.

3.2 Critical Race Theory and Orwell

1) Imperialism and Race in Orwell's Essays

- Shooting an Elephant: Scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha have examined Orwell's depiction of imperialism, highlighting the psychological complexities of colonial power dynamics. Bhabha notes that Orwell's internal conflict as the narrator reflects the moral ambiguities and inherent violence of colonial rule.
- Marrakech: Edward Said's concept of Orientalism provides a framework for understanding Orwell's portrayal of the racial other. Said argues that Orwell's observations, while sympathetic, still reinforce colonial stereotypes and the exoticization of the colonized.

2) Race and Class in Orwell's Novels

Down and Out in Paris and London: Patricia Hill Collins' intersectional analysis of race, class, and gender can be applied to Orwell's depiction of poverty. Collins' work suggests that Orwell's narrative, though focused on class, also subtly incorporates racial dimensions, particularly in his descriptions of immigrant communities and the racialized labour market.

3.3 The intersection of CRT and Feminist Theory

1) Intersectionality in Orwell's Narratives

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding the overlapping and intersecting social identities in Orwell's works. Crenshaw's framework helps illuminate how race, gender, and class are not isolated categories but interlinked, influencing characters' experiences and social positioning.

The Road to Wigan Pier: This work provides a rich text for intersectional analysis, as Orwell examines the plight of the working class while implicitly acknowledging the racial and gendered dimensions of poverty. Scholars like Bell Hooks have argued that such works, while progressive, often fail to address the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression fully.

4. Methodology: Social Constructivism in Analyzing the Work of George Orwell

Introduction to Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is a theory that suggests knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions and cultural norms. This approach posits that our understanding of the world is shaped by the context in which we live, including the influence of language, power dynamics, and societal structures. In applying social constructivism to George Orwell's work, this methodology explores how his writings reflect, critique, and interact with his time's social and political constructs.

Framework for Analysis

The analysis of Orwell's work through a social constructivist lens involves several key steps:

Contextualization:

Place Orwell's works within the historical, political, and cultural context of early to mid - 20th century Britain. This includes examining the impact of events such as the rise of totalitarian regimes, the decline of the British Empire, and the social conditions of Orwell's era.

Language and Power:

Analyze how Orwell uses language to construct and deconstruct power relationships. Orwell's famous concepts, such as "doublethink," "newspeak," and "Big Brother" from "1984," are particularly significant in illustrating how language can be manipulated to control thought and reinforce social hierarchies.

Social Constructs and Ideology:

Investigate the social constructs embedded in Orwell's narratives, such as class distinctions, imperialism, and gender roles. This involves identifying how these constructs are portrayed, challenged, or reinforced in his works, such as *Animal Farm*, *1984*, and *Burmese Days*.

Reader Interpretation and Meaning - Making:

Consider how Orwell's contemporary and modern readers interpret his works through the lens of their own social contexts. This step acknowledges that meaning is not static but is continuously shaped by the reader's cultural and societal background.

Textual Analysis

The methodology employs close textual analysis to uncover how Orwell's narratives reflect social constructs. For example:

In "**1984**": Examine how the Party's control over truth and history illustrates the social construction of reality and how

the concepts of "doublethink" and "newspeak" serve as tools for maintaining power by reshaping consciousness.

In "**Animal Farm**": Analyze the allegorical representation of Soviet Communism and how Orwell constructs the narrative to reflect the corrupting influence of power, using the farm as a microcosm of broader societal structures.

In "**Burmese Days**": Explore Orwell's portrayal of colonialism and racial hierarchies, considering how these constructs are both critiqued and, at times, unconsciously reinforced through the lens of a colonial officer.

Interdisciplinary Approach

This analysis integrates perspectives from history, political science, and literary theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Orwell's works engage with the social constructs of his time. By combining these disciplines, the analysis seeks to reveal the underlying assumptions and ideologies that inform Orwell's critiques of society.

Implications of the Social Constructivist Approach

Applying social constructivism to Orwell's work highlights the fluidity and contingency of meaning. It demonstrates how his narratives reflect the power dynamics of his era and contribute to the ongoing construction of social and political thought. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Orwell's critique of totalitarianism, imperialism, and other social structures while also acknowledging the limitations and biases present in his work.

The social constructivist methodology provides a powerful framework for analyzing George Orwell's work. It reveals how his narratives interact with and challenge the social constructs of his time. By focusing on the interplay between language, power, and societal norms, this approach deepens our understanding of Orwell's critique of the social and political forces that shape human experience.

5. Findings

1) Challenges and Contributions

Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argue that while Orwell's critiques of power are significant, his works must be read critically, acknowledging the limitations and biases inherent in his perspective as a white male intellectual. Spivak's critique of the subaltern can be applied to Orwell's tendency to speak for marginalized groups without fully engaging with their voices.

Therefore, Orwell's legacy is complex. While his works provide powerful critiques of societal injustices, they also reflect and sometimes reinforce the power structures he aims to criticize. This duality necessitates a nuanced reading that appreciates Orwell's contributions while interrogating his blind spots.

Social Constructivism in Orwell's Major Works

1) 1984:

Language and Thought Control: Orwell's concept of Newspeak illustrates the social constructivist idea that language shapes thought. The Party seeks to limit the range

of thought by limiting language, demonstrating how power can manipulate reality.

Reality and Surveillance: The omnipresent surveillance in "1984" constructs a reality where privacy is nonexistent, and individuals constantly perform under the gaze of authority. This creates a social reality based on fear and conformity.

2) Animal Farm:

Narrative and Power: The pigs' manipulation of the Seven Commandments reflects how those in power can reconstruct societal norms to maintain control. The changing commandments illustrate how reality is reshaped through language and propaganda.

Class and Social Hierarchies: Orwell constructs a microcosm of society on the farm, where social hierarchies are fluid and subject to manipulation by those in power. This dynamic showcases the constructivist notion that social structures are not fixed but created and maintained through social processes.

3) Shooting an Elephant:

Colonial Power Dynamics: The essay provides insight into how colonial power structures are socially constructed and internalized by both colonizers and the colonized. The narrator's actions are dictated by the expectations and norms of imperial authority, highlighting the constructed nature of colonial realities.

Identity and Performance: The narrator's identity as a colonial officer is a performance dictated by social expectations. His internal conflict reveals the tension between personal reality and socially constructed roles.

Social Constructivism in Orwell's Lesser - Known Works

1) Down and Out in Paris and London:

- **Constructing Poverty:** Orwell's portrayal of poverty depicts not merely economic status but a socially constructed identity. The stigma and social interactions that define the lives of the impoverished reveal how societal norms shape the experience of poverty.
- **Class and Identity:** Orwell explores how class identity is constructed through social interactions and cultural expectations. The narrative highlights social status's fluidity and class distinctions' constructed nature.

2) Homage to Catalonia:

- **Constructing Ideologies:** Orwell's experiences in the Spanish Civil War illustrate how political ideologies are constructed through discourse and social interactions. The conflicting narratives of different factions reveal the contested nature of ideological constructs.
- **Reality of War:** The varying accounts of the war presented by different groups highlight the constructivist notion that reality is subjective and shaped by perspective and context.

Feminist Theory and Orwell

1) Gender Dynamics in Orwell's Major Works

1984: Julia's Character has been the subject of feminist critique, with scholars like Daphne Patai arguing that Orwell's portrayal of Julia reflects deep-seated patriarchal biases. Patai points out that Julia's rebellion through sexuality is

ultimately undermined by her reduction to a mere object of Winston's desires.

Animal Farm: Feminist critics like Lisa Jardine have highlighted the absence of female agency in Orwell's allegory. Jardine's analysis shows how the marginalization of female characters mirrors real-world gender inequalities, even within revolutionary movements.

2) Orwell's Lesser - Known Works

Keep the Aspidochelone Flying: Critic Mary Eagleton examines the gender dynamics in this novel, focusing on the protagonist's relationships with women. Eagleton suggests that Orwell's depiction of women often vacillates between idealization and denigration, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender.

6. Analysis of Orwell's Works

1) Race and Empire in Orwell's Essays:

"Shooting an Elephant" is a poignant critique of British imperialism. A CRT perspective reveals how Orwell grapples with his complicity in the racial hierarchies imposed by colonial rule. The narrator's internal conflict illustrates the psychological burden of maintaining racial dominance.

"Marrakech": Here, Orwell's observations on the dehumanization of colonized peoples highlight the racial disparities inherent in imperialist ideologies. A feminist lens further explores the gendered dimensions of this dehumanization, particularly in the portrayal of native women.

2) Gender Dynamics in Orwell's Fiction:

"1984": The dystopian narrative of "1984" provides fertile ground for examining the intersection of gender and power. Julia's rebellion against the Party through sexual liberation can be seen as a feminist critique of patriarchal control. However, her ultimate subjugation and betrayal raise questions about Orwell's portrayal of female agency.

"Animal Farm": While primarily a political allegory, "Animal Farm" also reflects gendered power structures. The marginalization of female animals and the absence of a significant female revolutionary voice invite scrutiny from a feminist perspective.

3) Class, Race, and Gender in Orwell's Other Works:

"Down and Out in Paris and London": This semi-autobiographical work sheds light on the intersections of class and race. Through a CRT feminist lens, we explore how Orwell's depiction of poverty is racialized and gendered, revealing the complexities of social hierarchies.

George Orwell's works contain various references and depictions of women, reflecting his time's societal attitudes and personal views. Here are some notable quotes from his writings about women:

1) "1984":

Julia's Character: "She was very young, he thought, she still expected something from life, she did not understand that to push an inconvenient person over a cliff solves nothing."

Winston's Thoughts on Women: "It was always the women, and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallows of slogans, the amateur spies and nosers - out of unorthodoxy. "

2) "Animal Farm":

Role of Female Animals: While there are not many direct quotes focusing on female characters, the book portrays characters like Clover, the mare, who represents the working class and maternal figure: "Clover was a stout motherly mare approaching middle life, who had never quite got her figure back after her fourth foal. "

3) "Keep the Aspidistra Flying":

Gordon's Views on Women: "Women were not made for professions nor the world of commerce and politics. They are the dearest things in life, and a man is a poor devil who cannot find himself a woman to love him. "

4) "The Clergyman's Daughter":

Dorothy's Struggles: "But it is always the women who get the worst of it when things like this happen. They're the ones who have to pay for it in the end. It's not only the ruin of her own life, but it ruins her family as well. "

5) "Coming Up for Air":

George Bowling on His Wife: "Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood. "

6) "A Clergyman's Daughter":

Dorothy's Realization: "Women are supposed to be pure and virtuous, but they are also supposed to attract men. They are supposed to look beautiful and dress beautifully, but they must not waste time or money on it. "

7) Essays and Personal Writings:

Orwell on Women's Work: In his essay "Why I Write, " Orwell reflects on the role of women in society: "In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act. And it is women who are the natural tellers of truth in all its forms. "

These quotes illustrate Orwell's complex and sometimes contradictory views on women. While some of his portrayals reflect traditional and patriarchal attitudes, others highlight women's struggles and strengths in the face of societal norms. This complexity provides fertile ground for critical analysis through feminist lenses.

George Orwell's work contains a few notable quotes and reflections on women, though they often reflect the complexities and sometimes the limitations of his perspectives on gender roles. Here are some quotes from his writings:

1) From "1984" (1949):

"The sex instinct creates a world of its own which is outside the Party's control and which therefore had to be destroyed if possible."

2) From "The Road to Wigan Pier" (1937):

"In every marriage the fight is on as to who will be boss. In the average marriage it is the woman who is boss, partly because the man is already enslaved in the money - making

routine, partly because he has had to pursue her and pretend that she is his superior in order to gain her."

3) 3. From "Keep the Aspidistra Flying" (1936):

"She hated people who said things that embarrassed you. But that, of course, is the whole purpose of the woman's conversation: to embarrass the man."

4) From "Coming Up for Air" (1939):

"It struck me that one curious thing about women is that they can be persuaded into doing almost anything, and yet you never convince them of anything."

5) From "A Clergyman's Daughter" (1935):

"It struck her as singularly incurious that a woman like herself, who had never in her life experienced anything resembling passion, could be so appallingly experienced."

These quotes often reveal Orwell's critical and sometimes cynical observations about relationships, gender roles, and society's expectations. However, it is essential to note that his views often reflect his time's social and cultural norms, which can come across as outdated or problematic by modern standards.

George Orwell strongly opposed imperialism, which is evident in both his personal life and his writing. His views on imperialism were shaped significantly by his experiences serving as a British colonial police officer in Burma (now Myanmar) from 1922 to 1927. During this time, he witnessed firsthand the injustices and oppression inflicted by the British Empire on the colonized people. These experiences left him deeply disillusioned with imperialism and the role he played within it.

Evidence of Orwell's Anti - Imperialism

1) Personal Experience in Burma:

Orwell's time in Burma was a turning point in his life. He saw the cruelty and exploitation that imperialism imposed on the colonized populations, and he became increasingly critical of the British Empire's role in these regions. His discomfort with the violence and oppression led him to resign from the police force in 1927.

2) "Shooting an Elephant" (1936):

One of Orwell's most famous essays, "Shooting an Elephant, " vividly illustrates his anti - imperialist views. The essay reflects on his time in Burma and tells the story of Orwell, as a colonial officer, being pressured to shoot an elephant to maintain the expectations of imperial authority. The essay critiques the moral and ethical dilemmas of imperialism, showing how the system dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.

- Quote from "Shooting an Elephant":
- "I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. "

3) "Burmese Days" (1934):

Orwell's first novel, "Burmese Days", is a scathing critique of British colonialism in Burma. The novel depicts the racism, hypocrisy, and moral decay inherent in the colonial system. Through the story of the protagonist, John Flory, Orwell

exposes the corrupting influence of imperialism on both the colonizers and the colonized.

4) Political Beliefs:

Orwell's broader political beliefs also reflect his opposition to imperialism. He was a committed democratic socialist who believed in equality and justice. He saw imperialism as a form of oppression that was fundamentally incompatible with these ideals.

In summary, George Orwell was indeed against imperialism. His experiences in Burma profoundly shaped his worldview, leading him to criticize the exploitation and moral corruption inherent in imperialism throughout his writing career. His works, such as "Shooting an Elephant" and "Burmese Days", remain powerful critiques of imperialism's destructive impact on both the colonizer and the colonized.

7. Discussion

By applying CRT and feminist theory to Orwell's body of work, we uncover how he engages with issues of race, gender, and class. His positionality often tempers Orwell's critique of oppressive systems as a white, male, British intellectual. This analysis challenges readers to reconsider Orwell's legacy, acknowledging his contributions and limitations.

This literature review demonstrates that applying Critical Race Theory and feminist theory to George Orwell's works enriches our understanding of his narratives. By examining the intersections of race, gender, and class, scholars can uncover deeper layers of meaning and challenge traditional interpretations. When viewed through these lenses, Orwell's works reveal a complex engagement with social justice that is both illuminating and, at times, problematic. This dual perspective encourages ongoing critical dialogue and re-evaluation of Orwell's place in literary and political discourse.

Applying social constructivism to George Orwell's works allows a deeper understanding of how he critiques and deconstructs societal norms, power structures, and individual identities. Orwell's narratives illustrate the fluid and constructed nature of social realities, revealing the mechanisms through which power and language shape our understanding of the world. This approach enriches our reading of Orwell and underscores the importance of critically examining the social processes that construct our realities.

Reinterpreting George Orwell through a Critical Race Theory feminist lens enriches our understanding of his works and their socio-political implications. This approach highlights the multifaceted nature of his critique of power and underscores the importance of continually re-evaluating literary canons through diverse and intersectional perspectives.

This study offers a critical reappraisal of Orwell's works through CRT and feminist lenses, highlighting the strengths and limitations of his narratives. While Orwell's critiques of power and oppression remain significant, his analysis often overlooks the intersections of race and gender. By adopting a social constructivist perspective, this paper encourages

readers to appreciate Orwell's contributions while acknowledging the biases inherent in his work.

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