

ORWELL'S WRITINGS, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL AND THE LANGUAGE OF PEACE

Dipanvita Sehgal

English Literature, Arts Faculty, Delhi University, New Delhi, India

Orwell spoke about a massive and serious decline in the English language in his essay "Politics and the English Language" and has made mention of how changing political scenarios have always led to various detestable changes in the language and politics of the time. (Orwell) Why we can relate to what Orwell said in the 1940s is because we have not changed much since. Power structures and the way we receive them are all too similar in today's political world. Talking of power structures this essay attempts to examine links between what Orwell says, what the 1951 classic movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* shows and to verify if peace is an actual word with real meaning or a mere political propaganda that the mightier can always buy through threats of fear and violence.

Orwell explains how power keeps shifting from one exploitative sect to another whereas the masses continue to follow in a herd in whichever direction they find more appealing. Sometimes the power forces are aggressive and at other moments they attack as the benevolent patriarch. But attack they do. As an example, Orwell, in a response letter to Noel Willmet in 1944 says that he fears that Hitler might soon disappear but only at the expense of strengthening another 'fuhrer' and that all national movements seem to take non democratic forms and support one tyrant or another believing that the end justifies the means. (Davison) *The Day the Earth Stood Still* projects similar ideas when it shows how the hegemon, The United States of America, now attacked by more superior members from Space has been rendered powerless and Earth is supposed to bow down to the Alien power's dictates or perish. The alien, Klaatu speaks in a composed and rational tone as someone who has come to help and guide, much like the colonizer who was the so-called messiah for the 'uncivilized'. The difference is that here the entire Earth is 'barbaric' and needs improvement according to alien forces and it has no choice but to follow the dominant power.

He explains in the letter how we accord unaccounted power into the hands of one "fuhrer" or another (tyrannical leaders or hegemonic super states) by believing that they are supposed to be followed and their way is the 'right' way which then makes whatever the fuhrer says, official history. In this case he believes "two and two could become five if the fuhrer wished it." (Davison) What can be observed from the movie is that the US, even in a state of dire crisis does not immediately conform to the alien's demands of bringing together leaders and representatives from all nations. It tries to dominate the discussion and decide for everyone else. In the 1951 movie when the alien asks for all representatives to be called to hear his message, his request is refused and he is told his message will be "conveyed" to "the President". In the 2008 version of the same movie with the same title when Regina tries to head the discussion with him, Klaatu curtly asks, if she speaks for the entire human race and she replies that she speaks for the President of the US, as if that ends the discussion and there is nothing more to say about that. These methods surprise the foreigner because he does not live in an environment where unaccounted power is handed over to anybody.

The idea is that we are not looking for a society where we can all live as equals. We are on a constant lookout for a space in which we are more powerful, where we have the ones who call the shots on our team. Orwell writes, that the English population has merely accepted one tyrant over another, for example Stalin over Hitler. He felt that the English were ready for Authoritarian rule and falsification of history as long as it was in their favour or on their side. (Davison) In the movie however, what we gather from Klaatu's speech is that the place from where he comes there is no way to discriminate one from another. That only happens when an act of violence is committed and then the relationship that is formed is one between the aggressor and the police. He makes it clear that threats of violence by any group no matter where it is, will not be put up with. He explains that he represents a group of planets that has a police force that prohibits violence at all costs. The robot police's function is to guard planets and ensure peace at all costs. In matters of aggression they have unrestrained power over the citizens and that power cannot be revoked at all. If they sense violence they act consciously against the aggressor. They take no sides. So Klaatu's federation lives without armies and concentrates on more fruitful and productive ventures, free from war. He suggests that Earth can either join hands with them or face annihilation. It is for Earth to decide. There is no concept of a more powerful side in Klaatu's region which gives it a Utopian quality.

Drawing examples from Orwell's writings it can be seen how we are always just trying to settle for a "lesser evil" than to revolt against all evils and look for equanimity. Towards the end of his letter Orwell states as an answer to why he supports the war that it is the lesser of two evils because if one has to make a choice he would have to choose British Imperialism over Nazism or Japanese Imperialism. (Davison) Considering the period in which the movie came out and the ideas that Orwell shared around that time, we understand the notion of a superpower was very important and weaker countries had to choose their 'Gods' so that they knew who would 'protect' them in times of need and who they had to stand for on a battle front. The movie proposes an alternate 'God' that does not demand violence and loss of lives but this does not in any way mean that this God is not dominating or that it gives many choices. This 'God' is just the "lesser evil". Klaatu's speech clearly explains that Earth has to mend its ways and 'mending' here means joining the peace treaty of aliens and it has to stay 'peaceful' or the alien forces will let it know what violence really means when Earth will become a "burned out cinder" in a matter of seconds. It threatens to use more violence to combat existing violent strategies if Earth does not obey. And what makes this speech so unsettling is its last line: "The decision rests with you."

Thinking of the means of destruction on Earth and how those who have more or better weapons to ruin lives use them to manipulate power we clearly understand that peace cannot be 'had' or wanted today, no one really 'wants' peace. It can only be 'demanded'. This is exactly what Klaatu displays and proves in the movie. He does not fear violence. He tries to explain how his federation couldn't care less if the violence exercised on Earth stayed within its territory. But if it exceeds its space then others have means to stop them and better means at that. Peace is bought through generation of fear rather than discussion of the consequences of a chaotic and violent world. Those who lack resources or fall short of them in comparison to other powerful countries (or planets and galaxies) are asked to stay in their place and either 'peacefully' co-exist or perish but never should they try to display their progress to their superiors by their over-ambitious violent endeavours of testing atomic energy all over the globe and 'beyond'.

Orwell in his essay "You and the Atomic Bomb" talks about how the economic value of weapons and the amount of expert labour that goes into their making also decides the kind of political rule that is in store for a certain State. If we live in the age of expensive, specialized weapons the State dominates and subdues the individual and if the weapons can be produced by amateurs at a mass scale then there is scope of the public voice being heard. He asserts that when the atomic bomb was a mere rumour it was believed that when the physicists had solved the problem of figuring out its nuances then the destructive weapon would be in almost everyone's reach. According to Orwell, if that would have really been the case the clear demarcation between great states and small states would have ceased to exist and state control over the individual would have been weakened a great deal. However he clears the air that soon it was made known that its making required great industrial expertise and hence only three or four countries could even dare to make it. He furthers his argument by saying that ages of expensive weapons are those of despotism and those of simple and cheap weapons, the age of the common man. He ends by calling weapons like rifles, muskets democratic and tanks and battleships tyrannical. (Orwell) At the most evident level, the movie warns us about the threat that humankind poses to itself with nuclear arms. And as Ken Sanes says very rightly in his article, "The Day the Earth Stood Still: A Prophetic Original and a Mixed Up Remake", "the movie certainly knew how to exploit the tensions of the time for dramatic effect, since it was made when flying saucer "sightings" were relatively new. And the Soviet Union had only recently developed nuclear weapons. Of course, on the surface, the political message of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is perhaps a little too obvious, since it takes a set of political ideals from its time and projects them onto an interstellar arena. It doesn't merely support the United Nations and world control of dangerous weapons; it offers a vision of interplanetary government and disarmament. In fact, according to a New York Times article, the prime mover behind the movie, producer Julian Blaustein, said that his goal was to support a strong United Nations (which had just been created in 1945). That makes the movie a brilliantly conceived political argument, as well as a work of art." (Sanes) But it must be stated here that the alien only offers that Earth obey and 'peace' be bought. In no way is voice being given to those who need it. The equation will still remain of State against individual only that now the entire earth is a cumulative representation of the 'individual' and the alien force is the Supreme 'State'.

According to Orwell in "You and the Atomic Bomb" there is a need for a system of fighting and war that would not be so dependent on industrial mechanisms. This might be a suggestion towards 'peaceful' negotiations but the alien force follows this technique too through simple manipulation; fear of the unseen. He gives Earth a brief idea of what his federation is capable of by making the Earth 'stand still' and asks Earth to choose what it wants and embrace 'peace'.

Even in the most harmless tools that we use we actually propagate the idea of superiority of one over other causing everyone to mark their territory and consider everything of the 'outside' a danger. Orwell says in "You

and the Atomic Bomb”, “We were once told that the aeroplane had ‘abolished frontiers’; actually it is only since the aeroplane became a serious weapon that frontiers have become definitely impassable.The atomic bomb may complete the process by robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt, and at the same time putting the possessors of the bomb on a basis of military equality. Unable to conquer one another, they are likely to continue ruling the world between them, and it is difficult to see how the balance can be upset except by slow and unpredictable demographic changes.” (Orwell) In the harmless and ‘peaceful’ strategy proposed by Klaatu, Earth is actually falling prey to similar politics as it does within and across its own frontiers. Sanes states, to save humankind, the movie suggests, we need to look up to those who are evolved, mature and wise. The movie makes us identify with Klaatu and those who support him to join hands and make a perfect, peaceful world. The only problem, Sanes explains, is that we know all too well through incidents like French Revolution etc. that utopian ideas can turn into oppressive nightmares. (Sanes) In Klaatu’s world robots/machines have sole control over violent activity and here if Earth refuses to listen to this ‘benign federation’ then it will face annihilation.

Lee Wengraf mentions in his essay, "The Orwell We Never Knew" that from his initial antiwar position, Orwell said that the British and French empires did not deserve to be defended because they were "in essence nothing but mechanisms for exploiting coloured labor." (Wengraf) The movie in many ways comes down at its audience like a thunderbolt when it hurts Earth’s ego just like the discovery of ours being a heliocentric universe did. Now no few nations are “coloured labour”, but all of us are and that is what leads the military to react in such violent and frantic ways to get rid of the superior force to restore Earth’s ‘position of power’ more than anything else. And just like many writers refused to defend states that meant so much to them perhaps the movie calls for a certain lack of sympathy for Earth as well; suggesting that we really need to be ruffled up so that we stop with violence and propagation of hierarchies.

Orwell changed his stance later in life and claimed to be a revolutionary patriot, arguing that British capitalism was the lesser of two evils, but that Hitler could be overthrown only through socialism’s aid. Economic emergency compelled him to believe that revolution was very near. But since it was patriotism that he endorsed now, he defended "the impulse to defend one’s country and to make it a place worth living in." (Wengraf) Helen in the 2008 remake tries to talk Klaatu out of destroying Earth. They could all change, she says. She explains how it is only at the precipice of annihilation that people find it in themselves to really evolve. She is not a revolutionary but she gets the alien to believe her. In the original Klaatu and Gort leave before saying that they will be waiting to hear Earth’s decision.

In his essay “You and the Atomic Bomb” Orwell says “Had the atomic bomb turned out to be something as cheap and easily manufactured as a bicycle or an alarm clock, it might well have plunged us back into barbarism, but it might, on the other hand, have meant the end of national sovereignty and of the highly-centralised police state. If, as seems to be the case, it is a rare and costly object as difficult to produce as a battleship, it is likelier to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a ‘*peace that is no peace*’.” (Orwell) In the open-end of the original movie, we do understand that Earth will have to join the federation and embrace ‘peace’ but the question that always rings in our minds is, is it really peace we get, fight for or earn? Or is this merely a ‘peace that is no peace’?

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