



## A Marxist and Neo-Marxist Reading of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World

**Dr. K. Ramesh & Srinivas S**

*Dr. K. Ramesh teaches at Sri Paramakalyani College, Alwarkurichi,  
Tamil Nadu, India.*

*Srinivas S teaches at Rishi Valley School, Madanapalle, Andhra  
Pradesh, India.*

### Abstract

Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) offers a nightmarish portrait of a futuristic world where human beings are reduced to the level of automations for establishing stability. In fact, Huxley's portrayal of

the World State is heavily influenced by the socio-political climate of his time. Contemplating the possible misuse of emerging technologies by rulers for perpetuation of power, Huxley attempts to alert the readers about the perils of mass culture which diminish people's ability to think critically. Brushed aside as an insignificant work by many critics initially, the novel's social relevance and Huxley's concern for social welfare was later felt, the application of Marxist and Neo-Marxist literary principles to it indicating that it continues to remain relevant in the twenty-first century. Marxism interprets history in terms of class struggle. It affirms that the modes of production of material life condition social, political and intellectual life process in general. The Marxian notion that those who control material production have control over the rest of the society is taken literally in Huxley's *Brave New World* where the World State owns the production of human progeny. However, the production of babies in Hatcheries, chemical conditioning of embryos and hypnopaedia ensure that class struggle is avoided in the imaginary world, as the citizens are made to accept their social status without dissent. It would, however, be simplistic to assume that Huxley's dystopia aims merely to terrorise modern society. In the words of Raffaella Baccolini "...utopia is always maintained ... only outside the text" (520) and the readers are expected to consider dystopias only as warnings, so that they can prevent them from becoming reality.

**Keywords:** class struggle, dystopia, hypnopaedia, mass culture, utopia

## Introduction

This paper analyses Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) in the light of Marxist and Neo-Marxist approaches, highlighting the nexus between the kind of dehumanisation that is justified by the need for social stability and the triumph of mass civilisation. This analysis, it is expected, will enable the reader to compare the

imaginative early twentieth century society of Huxley's text with the contemporary society of the early twenty-first century.

Initially, *Brave New World* was not considered a work of literary merit by many scholars despite its popular appeal (Reiff 96). Disapproving it for its weak plot, shallow characterisation and monotony, these scholars criticised the book especially for the terrorising effect it allegedly had on people, though the nightmarish futuristic society painted in its pages was considered most unlikely.

The book, however, assumes great significance when viewed as a critique on the possible misuse of science and technology. For example, the scientific changes witnessed during the early twentieth century – including the invention of the atom bomb, the rapid strides made in communication technology and the impact of mass production of goods on civil society – made life comfortable, but also led to the dehumanisation of people. As Burroughs puts it, “the literary treatment of scientific matter” (417) is of great interest to the general reader.

*Brave New World*, though far ahead of its time, is the result of Huxley's knowledge of science and technology and his ability to foresee their future course and to present it artistically. In Huxley's own words, the sciences need the artist's intuitions and in their turn offer new materials for his creative work (*Literature* 79).

### **Critical Reception for *Brave New World***

In 1932, when it was first published, *Brave New World* was not considered worthy of critical study. Greenville Hicks, a member of the Communist party of the USA, dismissed the novel as “politically inappropriate” for failing to examine the then important issues such as “the war in Asia, bankruptcy in Europe, and starvation everywhere” (qtd. in Reiff 97). The press though offered a different view, with *Nation* proclaiming it a successful novel and the *New York Times* calling it entertaining, while insisting that it need not be taken as a “serious warning for the future” (97).

George Orwell, who was taught by Huxley himself at Eton, considered the World State a “danger past”, calling it “vastly less threatening than totalitarianism” (qtd. in Claeys ed. 125-126), and was critical of *Brave New World* for not reasoning out “why society should be stratified” as in the book (126). In Claeys’ view, however, Huxley’s novel was concerned “much more with how servitude becomes attractive than it is with science or technology as such” (116). The timing of Claeys’ work suggests that *Brave New World* continues to be relevant even in the twenty-first century. In this connection, the words of Leon Kass, appointed to chair the President’s Council on Bioethics in the U.S.A. in 2001, resonate powerfully:

*We are compelled to decide...whether children are going to be made to order rather than begotten, and whether we wish to say yes...to the road that leads to the dehumanized hell of Brave New World. (Stock 128)*

A similar fear is expressed by Ronald T. Sion, who sees in the novel the first full exposition of Huxley’s thesis that technology devoid of human wisdom will ultimately lead to a “seemingly blissful world made up of mindless, human automations” (126). This view is also supported by John H. Cartwright and Brian Baker, who point out that the citizens of the World State “perceive themselves to be free” with choices about “what to do in their leisure time” (241). The application of Marxist and Neo-Marxist theories in the analysis of the text will help the reader understand how the rulers of the World State manipulate its citizens, using social stratification, to fit perfectly into their system.

## **Marxism and Neo-Marxism**

The contemporary relevance of Marxist theory is often questioned because it was formulated for a society, whose socio-political underpinnings were quite different from those of today’s world. The analysis of a text using Marxist theory therefore brings with it the danger of appearing anachronistic. As a literary theory, however, Marxist theory “has been indissociably bound up with political

beliefs and ideological values” (Eagleton 2002: 170), and enables us to understand that failure of communist policy in a country (like USSR) does not in any way signal the failure of the Marxist theory underlying it. In addition, Marxism, by its nature, demonstrates a great “capacity to adapt to contexts and conjectures” (Bidet and Kouvelakis xi), as proved by the emergence of Neo-Marxist principles which reinterpret Marxian ideas “in new contexts or combine them with different traditions” (Bidet and Kouvelakis xiii).

Basically, Marxism interprets history in terms of class struggle, affirming that the modes of production of material life condition social, political and intellectual processes in general. In his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx argues in fact that the material productive forces of society may, from time to time, come into conflict with the “existing relations of production”, leading to an “epoch of social revolution” (Marx and Engels 31). The awakening of the proletariats from the exploitation they are subjected to and their efforts to change the *status quo* are therefore considered the foundations of an egalitarian society in Marxist Philosophy.

When Marxists chose to remain uncritical, however, and blindly accepted Marxian ideas, the Marxist philosophy was frustrated, at least from an intellectual perspective (Worsely 102). It is here that Engels’ warnings against obsession with economic determinism becomes relevant in the development of Marxist thought. As Engels reiterates in his letter to Joseph Bloch, “The *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life”, and not just economic production (Marx and Engels 39).

Furthermore, while classical Marxism, married to economic determinism, discredits the roles that dialectical processes such as technology and mass media play in influencing social life, Neo-Marxism acknowledges them as important. According to Adorno, a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, we live in a world, which is influenced by “bureaucracy, administration and technocracy” (Tom Bottomore 5), and where society and the consciousness of people are “totally reified” (5). In the words of

Max Horkheimer and Adorno, who critically analyse the reason for the world's descent into barbarism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), the culture industry “misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable” (Bernstein ed. 99). Marxist and Neo-Marxist principles enable the critic to analyse a piece of literature by fixing it in the socio-cultural matrix from which it originates and considering its relevance to the contemporary social and political set up too.

### **Total Domination through Total Collectivisation**

The Marxian notion that those controlling material production have control over the rest of the society is taken literally in Huxley's *Brave New World* where the World Controllers have total control over the production, as it were, even of human beings. The World State in fact controls all aspects of its citizens' lives, including the process by which their progenies are created, in order to establish social stability. As Karl Marx says in *The German Ideology*, the production of ideas and consciousness is actually interwoven with material activity and therefore “material intercourse of men – the language of real life” (32).

Aided by remarkable scientific progress, the World State produces bottle babies as per its requirements, and then systematically conditions them with the assurance “that...no happiness to be found except in work and obedience” (Firchow 122). The motto of the World State, namely “Community, Stability and Identity”, is in fact reified through internalisation, so that citizens see it as true, and not as mere ideological rhetoric. In the world that Huxley has created, the importance of society over individuals is thus accentuated, as preferred by Marx, but at the cost of human dignity, an inherent flaw of any autocracy.

In Adorno's view, the World State, which promises happiness for everyone, is actually modelled on America, which has attracted “intellectual émigré” (95) from several countries by its economic development. The newcomers have, however, been “overpowered

by the turbulent struggle for the maintenance of life” (95), joining the rat race in pursuit of economic prosperity, curbing, if not losing, their individuality in the process. The World State in *Brave New World* is an artistic representation of this latter attitude where total domination is achieved by total collectivisation.

It is worth pointing out here that many twentieth century scholars are critical of state sponsored collectivism. For example, H.G. Wells' *Men Like Gods* narrates the experiences of a group of Englishmen who are transformed into “peaceful, passionless Utopians...uncritically committed to scientific rationalism and the self-negating collectivist state” (Nicole 44). Such collectivisation, according to Herbert Marcuse, has become so widespread “to the point where even individual protest is affected at its root” (11).

### **Class Structure & Class Conflict in *Brave New World***

George Lukacs observes that in the Marxist tradition the division of society into classes is determined by “position within the process of production”. (46), adding that all classes are “ripe for hegemony” (53). In *Brave New World*, Mustapha Mond, the World Controller, may be seen as the owner of the means of production, since he is the one who decides the number of children to be produced in Hatcheries.

The citizens of the World State are classified based on their usefulness to the project of national stability. Accordingly, people are made to accept their social status and forgo individuality which, with its capacity for dissent, is a dangerous proposition to the controllers of the World State. Nowhere is the obliteration of individuality in citizens expressed more vividly than in the portrayal of the bottle-babies.

The stability of the World State depends largely on its rigid class structure. Each of the five classes – namely Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon – is made exclusive and self-sustaining, giving the World State the appearance of stability. Mond, the Controller, is in fact critical of people doing things on their own (i.e. things

outside their class remit) because such actions can upset the social order. People in the World State are thus akin to robots, programmed to follow instructions blindly.

Children belonging to the different classes are conditioned, both physically and psychologically, to accept and even adore their social status. They are systematically trained to be conscious of their usefulness to the society, a state of mind which is markedly different from the typical class consciousness adumbrated by Marxists—particularly from the restlessness of the proletariat, which is at the heart of social change.

Huxley's disillusionment with early twentieth century society for its meaningless, morally empty indulgences is in fact something any reasoning individual may have experienced at the time (or at similar times in human history). It is worth recalling here that Dickens' *Hard Times* depicts the pathetic life of children who are made to learn facts and to calculate, though such rote-learning stunts their imagination and creativity.

It is also worth noting that Industrial Revolution demanded the unflinching support of the working class which produced goods that could never be rightfully theirs. With artistic and intellectual avenues also closed to them, the workers were left with no choice but to accept passively the roles assigned to them by the owners of the means of production. Interestingly, though *Brave New World* frees workers – the Betas, Deltas and Epsilons – from the distasteful working conditions of the previous century, it prohibits them from understanding the nature of their work. This fact indicates that the perceived boundary between work and creativity has long roots in human history.

## **Psychological Conditioning and Love of Servitude**

Genetic methods are used by the World State to ensure that its citizens do not criticise state policies and that they embrace their work and their class. Brainwashing, a method of mental conditioning inspired by the findings of the Russian physician Ivan

Pavlov, and torture are generally employed by rulers to suppress the free will of individuals and bend it to the will of the State. The new world of Huxley does not require torture, however, because advancements in science and technology do the job of conditioning the lower classes to accept their position.

The conditioning that takes place from the time of fertilisation through an individual's formative years guarantees, in most cases, the individual's complete acceptance of every aspect of life in the World State. What freewill an individual may come to possess is controlled by manipulating heredity and the environmental factors that are likely to influence the individual. As the Director of Hatcheries acknowledges, "All conditioning aims at...making people like their inescapable social destiny" (*Brave New World* 26).

In the World State, the fate of an individual is predestined. Lenina, tasked with giving sleeping-sickness injections to embryos in the bottles, once forgets whether she has given it to a specific embryo, but decides against the risk of letting it have a second dose. Consequently, an Alpha Minus citizen will die exactly after twenty-two years eight months and four days from that moment. The World State thus plays God, making puppets of individuals and 'writing' their destiny beforehand.

Epsilons, the lowest class, are not only conditioned to do all kinds of hard work, but also made to love their servitude. Human beings take more time to mature than animals do, intelligence being a fruit of the delayed development. Since Epsilons do not require intelligence, however, Henry Foster, the Assistant Predestinator, works to revert the germinal mutation to make Epsilon embryos grow at a faster rate.

The Infant Nurseries, or Neo-Pavlovian Conditioning Rooms, take psychological conditioning to an extreme level. For example, flowers and books are electrocuted and burned in front of Delta children, who have no use for such objects in the World State's scheme of things, to ensure that they hate them for the rest of their lives.

## Propaganda and Thought Reduction

The stability of the World State in Huxley's *Brave New World* is maintained through effective propaganda about the State's principles. The World Controllers ensure that all groups including Alphas, who are gifted with some reasoning ability, understand fully and only what the State wants them to understand. Even embryos are not spared the propaganda, and aided by chemical persuasion and hypnopædia, they become ideal World State citizens.

According to Huxley, the effect of propaganda is determined by circumstances. It is therefore the duty of the rulers to ensure that the prevailing circumstances are in tune with the content of their propaganda. An individual may be affected by two types of circumstances—internal or psychological circumstances, and external circumstances which may change during war or “when means of production are altered and economic prosperity is increased or diminished. Changes in external circumstances are accompanied by changes in internal circumstances” (*Essays* 363-364).

In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley explains how modern dictators have exploited the power of language to make people think and express their (the dictators') ideas. A case in point is Hitler, who disseminated powerful rhetoric through the medium of technology as part of his propaganda, insisting that a propagandist should adopt “a systematically one-sided attitude towards any idea that has to be dealt with” (42). Hitler was in fact of the opinion that “all effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare necessities, and must be expressed in a few stereotyped formulas”, the constant repetition of which will imprint “an idea upon the memory of a crowd” (42).

In *Brave New World*, Helmholtz Watson is a lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering and a poet. In the World State, which has no use for Watson's poetry, however, his remit involves writing ‘feely’ scenarios – ‘feely’ being a form of motion picture that can also provide a sensation of touch – and composing hypnopædic rhymes and slogans. Watson's example clearly shows that in the

World State language has lost its meaning. Though the motto of the World State is “Community, Identity and Stability” (*Brave New World* 16), the word ‘community’ merely refers to a group of people in which people feel no love or compassion for one another. This point makes it clear that stability in the World State is achieved only by removing emotions and ideas which threaten the rulers’ view of stability.

In Huxley’s view, today’s rulers rely on “repetition, suppression and rationalisation” to get their way (*Essays* 35): repetition of certain words by the people so that they acquire the ring of truth; suppression of facts, which are inconvenient for the rulers themselves; and rationalisation of both in the name of social stability. Whereas in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*, a language called Newspeak is created to reduce (‘suppress’) the thought-range of the Party members, in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the College of Emotional Engineering makes up songs that condition people to be ideal citizens.

Given that languages like Polish and German are dead in the World State, and given that people feel simultaneously shy and bitter even about even an important word like ‘parent’, it may be satisfactorily inferred that communication has lost all meaning in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Communication begins with ideation, but since the World State has rendered its citizens incapable of any serious thought, they find delight in small talk. As Adorno puts it, communication becomes “objectively superfluous” (101) when there is no intention of finding out “what was hitherto unknown” (101).

## **Consumption as the Law of Life**

Huxley’s *Brave New World* is a reflection of American life during the early twentieth-century. With consumption having become the law of life, the economy of the World State, the activities of its citizens and even the games played by its children are so designed as to pay tribute to consumerism. The following excerpt from a speech made by the Director of Hatcheries shows how consumerism is one of the cornerstones of the World State:

*Not so very long ago..., Gammas, Deltas, even Epsilons, had been conditioned to like ...wild nature in general. The idea was to make them want to be going out into the country, and so compel them to consume transport....*

*A love of nature [however] keeps no factories busy [so] it was decided to abolish [it]...but not the tendency to consume transport.... The problem was to find an economically sounder reason for consuming transport.... We [therefore] condition the masses to hate the country.... [but]...to love all country sports. (*Brave New World* 30-31; parentheses ours).*

The analysis of the novel in the light of Fredric Jameson's notion of 'commodification', i.e. reliance on commodities even to reveal basic emotions, allows readers to understand that the World State manipulates the emotions of people to make them feel happy, though their life lacks any real purpose. The Director in fact wonders how, in the days of Ford, most of the games were played without more apparatus than a ball or a few sticks and a netting; with, in short, "nothing whatever to increase consumption" (*Brave New World* 36).

Dialectical materialism has focused our attention on the power that commodities assume over us. Adam Roberts acknowledges the "power and vitality things have...how people start desiring them, and how they therefore acquire a power over people" (*Fredric* 150). It becomes obvious that commodities cannot be treated merely as lifeless things, but as vital cogs in the World State's wheel, making citizens rely on the State to satisfy their consumerist needs. The World State is thus a society with false needs, which makes its citizens accept the status quo without critical thinking, rendering them one-dimensional.

## **One-Dimensional Society and Possibility of Hope**

Despite its obvious bleakness, Huxley's dystopian *Brave New World* is not without a ray of hope. Though citizens of the World State are conditioned using advanced scientific techniques, such conditioning is not foolproof. The fallibility of the conditioning process is evident

in the characters of Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson, both of whom possess characteristics which are unique for their class, and refuse to submit to the designs of the World State. In short, Marx and Watson represent the failure of the World State's ambition to interpellate its ideology among all its citizens. They also hold out the hope that the status quo may change in the future.

Huxley's real intention in writing *Brave New World* then was not to terrorise people, but to make them aware of the adverse impacts of the misuse of scientific discoveries and inventions. As Carl Freedman puts it, the negative utopias of the twentieth century, such as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, are drained of "much of their power if we attempt to read them not as complexly critical estrangements of certain actual tendencies of Soviet and Anglo-American society, but instead as factual futurology" (55)

## Conclusion

The World State of *Brave New World* is considered by critics to be a dystopian projection of Huxley's own society, one of its biggest problems (in Huxley's own view) being people's willingness to give up "their freedom...to government control" (Reiff 61). Huxley himself considers his novel more relevant to modern society than his student George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* because of his belief that the "ruling oligarchy will find less...wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power" (62) as described in *Brave New World*.

The novel also criticises the Russian Revolution, because it failed to establish the equality and human dignity it had promised. The names of some of the citizens of the World State, including Bernard Marx and Lenina Crowne, may in fact be seen as grim reminders of the spectacular failure of Communism in Russia. The novel is equally relevant in the twenty-first century because, as Huxley foresaw, excessive meaningless entertainment is diverting the attention of a majority of people from important social and political problems such as unemployment and inequality.

Huxley's emphasis on the need to preserve human freedom is represented in the novel through the conflicting views of John, the Savage, and Mustapha Mond, the World Controller, the one the old and other the new. While Mustapha Mond, by virtue of his power, has access to the "forbidden books" and is aware of the "old beliefs and ideals", John, who is acquainted with the works of Shakespeare and the religious practices of the savages, challenges the values of the World State. Eventually, however, John understands the futility of his existence and commits suicide.

Though essentially a dystopian work, *Brave New World* holds out some hope for the future of mankind. In order to make that future better than the present, however, important steps need to be taken based on the warnings sprinkled throughout the novel. After all, as Baccolini argues, "only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape...a dark future" (520).

In his foreword to *Brave New World*, Huxley suggests that if he were to rewrite *Brave New World*, he would offer a third alternative to John: the option of living in a community where "where science and technology would be harnessed to serve rather than to coerce mankind" (Bradshaw (Introduction), 2004: xxxi). This rethink on Huxley's part reflects his view that literary writers must acquire at least "a broad understanding of how science influences their society" (Sion 197). Similarly, intelligent scientists should not "divorce their...technologies from human experience" (197).

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## **Dr. K. Ramesh**

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Dr. K. Ramesh teaches at Sri Paramakalyani College,  
Alwarkurichi, Tamil Nadu, India.

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## **Srinivas S**

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Srinivas S teaches at Rishi Valley School, Madanapalle,  
Andhra Pradesh, India.

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