

Kathryn MacQuarrie

Ms. Scott

IB English 11.1

23 March 2017

1099

Oppression in *1984* and *The Swallows of Kabul*

In *The Swallows of Kabul* by Yasmina Khadra and *1984* by George Orwell, controlling totalitarian governments are conveyed. Shown through diction and the use of similes, both authors display how these governments dominate their societies, and through motif, though displayed by varying images, how overwhelming atmospheres of oppression develop. Throughout their novels, Khadra and Orwell exhibit societies trapped and reshaped by oppression.

In *1984*, the omnipresent posters of Big Brother demonstrate the immense power the Party possesses over its citizens, constantly reminding the citizens of their insignificance. Orwell shows this from the beginning of the novel, where posters stare down from “every commanding corner” (Orwell 4) and are embellished with the slogan “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” (Orwell 4). Orwell’s choice of “commanding” implies these posters are authoritative, as their positioning establishes that they overshadow the citizens of Oceania, denoting their dominance. Moreover, opting for capitalization of the slogan stresses the significance of these words, as they stick out on the page of the novel, overtly exhibiting their superiority. The

capitalization also causes the slogan to remain fixated in one's mind, allowing one to constantly remember Big Brother's omnipotence.

Through the motif of Big Brother, Orwell reveals the subjugation of Oceania's society. As Big Brother is "constantly [seen] on posters" (Orwell 294), there is never a moment where his "enormous face" (Orwell 294) is out of mind, reminding one that Big Brother is scrutinizing their every move. Orwell's diction of describing Big Brother as "enormous" presents the supremacy Big Brother holds, as his size implies that he physically overpowers Oceania's citizens, leaving them inferior. Also, Orwell has Winston "always [thinking of Big Brother's face] as being a metre wide" (Orwell 294) and believing the eyes of Big Brother "followed you to and fro" (Orwell 294). The simile used to describe the immense width of Big Brother's face depicts the image of a colossal, intimidating facade suppressing Oceania solely by its size, confining Oceania by its magnitude. The imagery of Big Brother's eyes invokes a sensation of uneasiness, denoting that one is under constant surveillance. Orwell uses this to display oppression, as it exposes that one never has a moment of privacy; the Party is always watching.

Furthermore, Orwell concludes the novel with a feeling of inferiority, where Big Brother towers above Oceania's citizens. This use of framing reiterates the importance of Big Brother, as having him at both the beginning and end conveys that he is inescapable and shall never be overcome. Additionally, in the novel Winston describes Big Brother as "[the] colossus that bestrode the world" (Orwell 310). Orwell's choice of "colossus" and "bestrode" indicate superiority, as this hyperbole of size makes Big Brother resemble a deity, with his vast size allowing him to conquer the planet.

Lastly, Orwell's decision to conclude with Winston "[loving] Big Brother" (Orwell 311) implies the Party's totalitarian rule cannot be defeated. This is revealed as Orwell had Winston

severely “loathing” (Orwell 17) Big Brother at the beginning and despising the Party’s concepts. Through altering Winston’s character, changing his opinion of Big Brother to love, Orwell shows that under their domain, the Party controls everything and makes it apparent that even those who rebel cannot succeed in overpowering them. No matter one’s efforts, they remain dominated by the Party, trapped in oppression.

Comparably, Khadra’s repetition of “relentless heat” (Khadra 5) in *The Swallows of Kabul* displays the same sense of oppression. Like Orwell, Khadra shows this motif from the beginning of the novel, where “the heat has scorched and smothered” (Khadra 1) its surroundings, leaving nothing but an environment of discomfort and unease. As Big Brother represented the Party, heat correlates to the Taliban, as they too have “smothered” Kabul, reshaping it and annihilating anyone who countered them, dominating Kabul’s society.

Khadra continues to show the domination of heat and the Taliban as a “mass of hot, moist air presses down on [Kabul]” (Khadra 60). By personifying the heat, Khadra literally describes the heat as suppressing the citizens, as by pushing downwards, it compresses Kabul, leaving the citizens inferior. Moreover, describing the heat as a “mass”, provides the imagery of an immense supremacy that cannot be overcome, like Big Brother’s “enormous” (Orwell 294) facade in *1984*. The choices of “hot” and “moist” create a sense of unease, as it describes a repulsive environment, leaving one suffocated by the implacable heat. This atmosphere is comparable to that of Oceania in *1984*, as in both, the citizens remain confined in oppression.

Like Orwell, Khadra shows the intensity of a domineering dictatorship by displaying the intensity of their control. On page 81, heat “beats down like a blacksmith”, crushing the citizens below. This simile demonstrates the strength of this heat, as it hammers down on Kabul, suppressing those below. The same authority is unveiled in *1984*, where Big Brother’s

“colossus” (Orwell 310) figure looms above Oceania, smothering the citizens beneath him. Additionally, by Khadra having the heat “beat down” on Kabul, she implies that heat governs Kabul, as it constantly looms over the city, like Big Brother scrutinizing Oceania’s society in *1984*. By confining their societies in oppression, both authors denote complete domination.

Comparably to Orwell, Khadra concludes her novel with an atmosphere of suppression. Whereas Big Brother stares down at Winston, the “dangerously hot” (Khadra 192) heat beats down upon Atiq. This framing illustrates that heat relentlessly traps Kabul; heat importunately pursues, no matter one’s efforts to escape it. As Khadra displays heat throughout the novel, she, like Orwell, suggests the tyranny cannot be overcome. Moreover, describing the heat as “dangerous” incites the sense that this heat is threatening and that it should not be countered, comparable to Big Brother in *1984*. Also, like Winston in *1984*, Atiq’s mental state changes, revealed after Musarrat’s execution. Atiq, “looking like his own ghost” (Khadra 190), mindlessly wanders through Kabul, and later “violently [tears]” (Khadra 194) burqas from women in his search for Zunaira. Under the Taliban, Khadra shows that Atiq could not prevent the execution, and this caused him to ultimately lose his sanity, like Orwell having Winston succumb to the Party.

In their novels, Khadra and Orwell exhibit how oppression consumes a society. The effects of dictating governments are consistently shown throughout both novels, implying the same atmosphere of domination. Orwell illustrates Big Brother and the Party’s control, whereas Khadra incorporates heat throughout her novel, ensuring the Taliban’s power is apparent. Both authors concluding with their main characters in altered mentalities conveys the same idea: when a totalitarian government retains control of a society, they trap it in oppression, leaving the citizens subjugated to their rule.

Works Cited

Khadra, Yasmina. *The Swallows of Kabul*. Translated by John Cullen, Random House, 2004.

Print.

Orwell, George. *1984r*. London, Penguin Books, 1990. Print.