

The Perception of Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism in Various Universitas Andalas Students: A Reader-Response Criticism of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the readers' responses to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regarding their perception of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in various Universitas Andalas students as based on the said novel. This research focuses on how the novel's readers understand totalitarianism and authoritarianism after reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Furthermore, this research also investigates the readers' answer on why they relate those mentioned concepts to their lives based on the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In analyzing the readers' responses, we apply a reader-response theory that focuses solely on the object's extrinsic elements, that is, in this case, the readers. As for the study method, we utilize the quantitative mixed with the qualitative method and library research.

Keywords: totalitarianism, authoritarianism, Reader-Response Theory, George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

INTRODUCTION

Totalitarianism is a form of government or political system that bans opposition parties, restricts the nation's opposition, and enforces control over public and private life to an utmost high degree. Nobody is entirely free from the prying eyes of the government. According to Arendt (2017) in her book entitled *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, totalitarianism is a form of government or political system that possesses absolute control that replaces propaganda with indoctrination and violence to make people submit to realize its ideological doctrines frequently (390).

Totalitarianism is the complete form of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by the renunciation of political plurality, using reliable centralized power to preserve the existing state of political affairs. Cerutti (2017), in his research book, *The Concepts of Politics: An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, claims that authoritarianism is one of the many forms of government characterized by a strong central authority, making a single person having the supreme power, rejecting the plurality of politics, negations of law, power-separating, and vote-based democracy (17).

There are quite a handful of countries that are using totalitarianism or authoritarianism as their form of governing. Such countries include North Korea, China, and the State of Eritrea. These countries' governments exercise a practice of extreme control over their people. There is no such thing as freedom of speech or the other types of freedom within the countries with a totalitarian or authoritarian regime, and thus the society of those regimes is typically stagnant and depressing.

In literary works, using totalitarianism and authoritarianism can make said works categorized in the dystopian genre. Famous works such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin have one thing in common that makes them have one underlying element. All of these mentioned books have one thing in common: they are books with a dystopian genre. Books with the dystopian genre are characterized by a bleak future, heavy and dark themes, and the destruction of humanity's conscience. Another famous literary work with the dystopian genre and the totalitarianism topic is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, also commonly written as *1984*, is a fictional dystopian novel with a social science subject published in 1949 and was written by an English novelist George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a novel about a dystopian alternate reality of Great Britain, later known as Airstrip One, governed by a totalitarian regime known simply as The Party. Airstrip One exists in Oceania, one of the soon to be totalitarian super-states in 1984. Airstrip One is currently at perpetual war with the other two states, is in constant government surveillance, has historical negationism, and is constantly bombarded with propaganda. The main character, Winston Smith, is one of the members of the Outer Party. Constantly overworked and discontented with his life under the Party's regime, he started to have doubts for the Party. Winston then tries to covertly overthrow Big Brother, whom he hates, with the help of the people that have the same idea as him regardless of how the Thought Police may already be hot on his trail.

George Orwell was an English writer, an essayist, a journalist, and also a critic. He was born in Motihari, Bengal, India, in the year 1903 as Eric Arthur Blair. Orwell was known for producing many works related to social criticism, stating his strong support for democratic socialism and his disagreement with the totalitarian regime in many of his works. Besides his famous fiction works like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), he also produced non-fiction works, namely *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Furthermore, Orwell's works are still relevant even in modern popular culture and political culture. His influential works created the adjective "Orwellian", which describes social practices of totalitarian and authoritarian.

One example of the Orwellian case is electronic devices, substantial technology companies, and social media. Vena (2021), in his article "Are We Entering the Orwellian Era of "Nineteen Eighty-Four?" argues that the world might look in a near state of totalitarianism but only in the area of technologies produced by big companies. Vena's argument can be supported considering that many smartphones and social media are constantly pestering their users to allow their products access to their users' private information. Furthermore, there are also cases where those big technology companies steal their users' data and then use them for their gain.

We argue that the theme of totalitarianism in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* matters among various Universitas Andalas students. We wish to know how the reader perceives those influences of totalitarianism in today's society based on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. To analyze the depiction of said elements, the writer applies a reader-response criticism to know what the readers of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* think about that matter. We hope this research makes a valuable contribution to today's concern regarding literary studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We used the reader-response theory to analyze this research to know how the readers perceive and respond to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and how it influences them. In this research, We used qualitative and quantitative methods integrated through a survey to identify readers' influences and impacts on reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Reader-Response Criticism is a literary theory that concentrates on the readers and their experience of a literary work. Unlike other literary theories that concentrate on the author of the work, its content, and its form, Reader-Response Criticism focuses solely on the readers' response to the literary work. According to Davis and Womack (2002), in their book *Formalist*

Criticism and Reader-Response Theory, Reader-Response Criticism pours quite an amount of attention to how the reader responds to literary texts in many different ways and to the act of reading itself (51). Furthermore, Tyson (2006) wrote a book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, where she categorized the Reader-Response Criticism into five types of approaches: Transactional Reader-Response Theory, Affective Stylistics, Subjective Reader-Response Theory, Psychological Reader-Response Theory, and Social Reader-Response Theory (172).

The "Horizon of Expectation" is a foundational term in Reception Theory, created by Hans Robert Jauss, a version of reader response literary theory that highlights any reader's reception in interpreting a literary text. In his book *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Jauss (1982) describes the concept of "Horizon of Expectation" as a component of his theory of literary history where he aims to decrease the gap between the schools of literature and history that made the readers only have a small role in interpreting a literary work (25). More importantly, it is a structure where the reader grasps the meaning of, decode and assess a literary work based on cultural codes that they have experienced; as a result, the readers might have different interpretations than those from the previous generation (23-24).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Data

In this part, we present the data collected through a survey, which the readers of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* participated in filling in a questionnaire entitled "Survey Respons Pembaca terhadap 1984 Karya George Orwell" (Reader Response Survey of 1984 by George Orwell). That said questionnaire was made using a Google Form that acts as a digital survey, and it was then distributed through an instant messaging media, namely WhatsApp. Below is where we elaborate the chronology of how we managed to gather twenty-eight participants for our survey. Our survey participants comprised various Universitas Andalas students, ranging from first-year students to fourth-year students.

We composed a Google Form questionnaire on Friday, March 26, 2021, and we started to publicly distribute it on the next day, which was on Saturday, March 27, in the same year of 2021. We mainly distributed our Google Form questionnaire of a survey on an instant messaging smartphone application named WhatsApp to various Universitas Andalas students who claimed that they are readers of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Mainly, our survey respondents answered our questionnaire irregularly throughout the beginning of May until the

end of April, which was the month when we closed our Google Form questionnaire after we gathered twenty-eight respondents from it.

The reason for our early closing of that said survey is because we can no longer find nor make contact with Universitas Andalas students who have finished reading the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Thus, we decided to stop the distribution of our Google Form questionnaire, effectively ending ourselves from getting any more possible participants for our survey. That concludes the elaborated chronology of how we managed to gather twenty-eight participants for our survey. Continuing below is the section where we elaborate the presentation of our questionnaire's respondents.

First of all, we start his section by presenting our respondents' demographic information, which are the characteristics of the respondents in terms of their age, gender, and faculty and department. Some twenty-eight respondents participated in this survey, and all of them are students of Universitas Andalas.

The respondents indicated their ages as follows:

Table 4.1. The Age of the Respondents

Age	Frequency
20	5
21	11
22	5
23	4
24	3
Total:	28

The number of respondents that we got for this survey is twenty-eight people. Most of the respondents are twenty-one years old, meaning that most of our respondents are in their fourth year at the university. It indicates that the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell is more prevalent among university students in their fourth year.

Table 4.2. The Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency
Female	13
Male	15
Total:	28

The number of respondents that we got for this survey is twenty-eight people. More than half of the respondents are males. It means that both genders read the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but its genre is leaning more towards the men's liking in terms of popularity, if not both genders.

The breakdown of the respondents' faculty and the department was as follows:

Table 4.3. The Faculty and Department of the Respondents

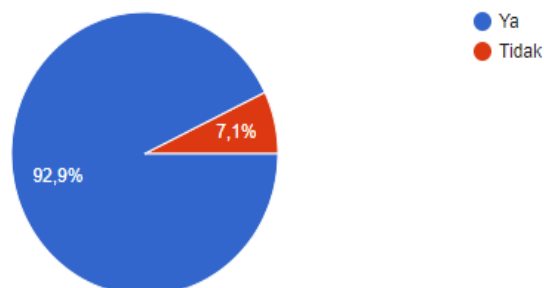
Faculty and Department	Frequency
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Sastra Inggris	12
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya; Sastra Indonesia	2
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya; Sastra Minangkabau	2
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya; Sejarah	1
Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik; Sosiologi	8
Fakultas Teknik; Jurusan Teknik Industri	2
Fakultas Peternakan; Nutrisi dan Teknologi Pakan	1
Total:	28

The number of respondents that we got for this survey is twenty-eight people. The number of English Department (Sastra Inggris) students who read the novel is twelve people, the most frequency. Then, it is followed by Sociology (Sosiologi) students, eight people. It means that the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more prevalent among English Department students and Sociology students. To sum it up, the readers of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell are mostly twenty-one-year-old male English Department students.

For the next part, we present the respondents' view and understanding of the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in general and in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. There are twelve items in the questionnaire, and the questionnaire includes an open-ended question within. However, we present only the highlight of the questions item that is related to the research questions. First, we present the respondents' understanding regarding the concept of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. The numbers indicated that more than 90% out of twenty-eight of the respondents do understand those concepts.

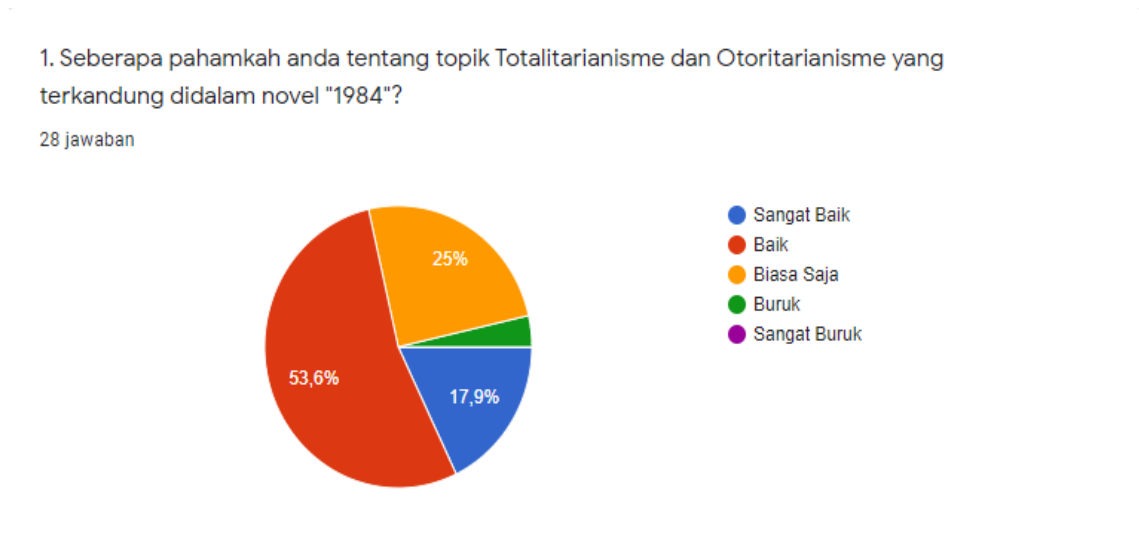
1. Apakah anda memahami istilah/konsep Totalitarianisme dan Otoritarianisme?

28 jawaban



Secondly, we present the respondents' understanding regarding the concept of totalitarianism and authoritarianism that are contained in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by

George Orwell. Around 50% out of twenty-eight respondents answered that they understand the concept of totalitarianism and authoritarianism contained in the novel.



Lastly, we present the readers' answers regarding their awareness of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of the real-life phenomena of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Most of them answer that they can relate those concepts to the government of North Korea and how it is a destructive and unfair way to govern a country. The respondents also answered that totalitarianism and authoritarianism remind them of the New Order in Indonesia. Regarding the New Order era of governing, one respondent mentioned that totalitarianism and authoritarianism nowadays could be found in technology that eavesdrops on users' private information. Furthermore, this invasive and binding behaviour can also be found in the form of strict school rules of uniform in Indonesian high schools; the boys are not allowed to let their hair grow past the ears and neck.

Analysis

In this part, we present the findings related to the research question. First of all, the terms totalitarianism and authoritarianism have a terrible reputation among the readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and more so of those concepts. The respondents' answers are almost about the negative side of those concepts and almost none of the positive side. In terms of the difference between those concepts, it seems that most of the respondents lumped both of them into a single meaning; a government in where one person reigns supreme and is full of restrictive law that forbids its country from any form of freedom. Moreover, regarding the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the respondents seem to lump both concepts into one definition; a mysterious, faceless leader who

is watching his citizens' every move and is unforgiving of any attempt of rebellion. To sum it up, the respondents have a terrible view regarding the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. We argue that respondents view those concepts as a wrong cause; they have been exposed to the concepts negatively.

The first research question is related to the paragraph above: How do the readers understand totalitarianism and authoritarianism after reading George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Regarding the respondents' understanding of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in general, the respondents answered that they understand those concepts well and those concepts still relevant to various Universitas Andalas students, which in turn means that those concepts in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are still quite interesting enough to be understood well by its readers. However, just like mentioned above, the term and concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism have gathered a handful of negative responses and views. According to Minardi (2020), in his article in which he interviewed a writer of Massachusetts Institute, he correlates the totalitarian regimes in the past as something worse than the extinction of humanity to the lack of freedom, privacy, and overall control of one's own life.

Moving onto the second and last research question is why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written by George Orwell relatable or not relatable to the readers' lives today. Most of the respondents answered that they could relate the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to their life. They relate the concept of totalitarianism and authoritarianism with the government of North Korea and the past New Order era of governing in Indonesia. A respondent answered that they could relate the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism to how the technology behaves nowadays; that is how it is constantly trying to collect its user's private information with or without its user's consent. Furthermore, this invasive and binding behaviour can also be found in the form of a strict school's rules where there exists a rule to dictate how the students dress and if it is broken, a non-negotiable punishment will be issued to the students who break it. It indicates that the novel contains an opposing view regarding totalitarianism and authoritarianism, further supporting our argument regarding the research question above.

We argue that the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is still relevant today because the recent events mentioned above have made it relevant again. As a society, it is almost akin to us having anticipated said happenings by inventing new rules and are too reliant on technology to be more prepared for the upcoming events that might be harsher than the current events. The respondents are sure of negatively giving their view and opinion of totalitarianism and

authoritarianism because they only received the harmful exposure of said concepts based on their experience in the novel. It might be the reason why the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is relatable to its readers, and it is because they experience the same things that are happening in the novel in their current lives. According to Bradfield (2019) in his article in *the Los Angeles Times*, the novel's author feels that the terrifying thing of totalitarianism might be because we are too prepared to submit for it seeing that we are too reliant on technology to do so anything. It also applies to authoritarianism, in which we are too for it, too.

It seems that it is mainly due to how technology behaves nowadays. It collects its user's private information and is constantly breaching their privacy. Therefore, it can be said that the readers of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can relate the said novel to their lives because they are too prepared for the upcoming events related to totalitarianism and authoritarianism also of their constant usage of the technology.

CONCLUSION

The study produced mixed data types through a survey questionnaire to identify the readers' perception of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in today's modern society as based on the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. The first research question concerns understanding the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism after reading George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Regarding the respondents' understanding of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in general, they answered that they understand those concepts well. However, the term and concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism have gathered a handful of negative responses and views from the novel's readers. The next and last research question is the reason why George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is relatable or not relatable to the readers' lives today. While some respondents cannot relate the examples of modern forms of totalitarianism and authoritarianism in today's society based on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, many of the respondents answered that they can, and those concepts are still relevant to today's modern society. It has shown that the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is still relevant today because the recent events that happened today have made it relevant again, mainly because they are too prepared for it and are too reliant on technology

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