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A Foucauldian Reading of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*

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Abstract: Michel Foucault, the twentieth century philosopher, brings a new perspective to the concepts of madness and power. He shows how the perception of the concept of madness changes in his "History of Madness". In Classical Age, mad people were treated as animals and the aim was to tame them as they were a threat to the order of the society. However, in Renaissance that perception changed and the mad were started to be appreciated because madness was affiliated with knowledge. In the eighteenth century, it was seen as the disease of the society, not of the individual. In Peter Shaffer's "Equus" the main character, Alan, is thought to be mad and the doctor Dysart starts questioning the characteristics of madness. First, Dysart sees Alan as a customer; however, at the end of the play, he criticizes his own profession as it aims to create normal people who are purified from their passions. The definition of power by Foucault is not restricted upon the oppressor and the oppressed as he focuses more on the subjects of power. According to Foucault in all kinds of relationships, the power exercises and it can be claimed that the prerequisite of the existence of the power is the people. Power cannot only be evaluated as something possessed by certain people, classes or institutions and Foucault criticizes that kind of understanding of power. In Shaffer's "Equus", the power operates between the doctor and the patient and within the family members. The doctor seems superior as the hospital provides an advantage as a panoptic machine. However, the patient starts establishing the course of events, and it can be seen that the patient gains the power. The parents of Alan are quite distinct from each other. Dora, Alan's mother, is excessively religious, but Frank, Alan's father, is an atheist and he puts the blame on religion in Alan's case. Both parents contribute to the madness of Alan and become object, target, and the references. All in all, we are all subjects of power in the grand mechanism of power.

Keywords: Madness; Power; Foucault; Equus; Drama.

1. Introduction

The 20th century philosopher Michel Foucault unveils how the power operates within all kinds of relationships in the society in his major works such as *The History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality*. He defines power and categorizes it; however, he does not divide people into two camps as the oppressor and oppressed. Instead, he brings a new perspective to the concept of power. He makes a detailed research on how power is imposed upon people via some institutions such as army, school, hospital and asylum. Schaffer (1973) play "Equus", written in 1973, takes place in an institution where the psychiatrists are trying to normalize people by making them compatible with the social norms. It is a story of a seventeen-year-old boy who blinds six horses with a metal spike as they have, in a way, witnessed the sexual intercourse that he has failed to have with a girl called Jill. He has a great obsession with horses, and the Latin word for the horse, "Equus," becomes the representative of God for him. Nevertheless, the play does not only focus on Alan who committed this extreme crime. After the sessions he has with Alan, Martin Dysart, the psychiatrist also starts to question his life and the fundamentals of his profession. Two different value systems; Apollonian and Dionysian are portrayed in the play by Alan and Dysart. This paper aims to analyse the concept of madness and power relations in the light of Michel Foucault's works.

2. Analysis: The Concept of Madness

In the 21st century, it is admitted that madness is a kind of mental disease; however, as Khalfa (2006) states in the introduction of *History of Madness*, "history of madness is not the history of a disease" (xv). Only in the modern phase that corresponds with the end of the eighteenth century, "[m]adness has now become the exclusive object of a medical perception. ... the mad are now locked up *in order to be cured*" (xviii). This has been "the modern experience of madness" and it is quite different from the earlier practices (xv). For example, in Renaissance madness was associated with knowledge; however, before the Renaissance, in his book titled *Michel Foucault*, Barry Smart claims that:

[i]n the classical age madness was encompassed within the general experience of unreason, segregated along with what were considered to be other forms of ‘social uselessness’, that is classes of persons deemed to be a threat to social order and morality. (Smart, 2002).

The mad were seen as a threat to the social order and they were defined with “unreason” and there was another characterization for them. Foucault defines madness in classical age with the “image of bestiality” in *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006a). In classical age, madness was considered to be “the direct relation between man and his animality” (148). Foucault puts forward that:

The men chained to the walls of the cells were not seen as people who had lost their reason, but as beasts filled with snarling, natural rage That model of animality slowly came to dominate the asylums, and explained their cage-like, menagerie aspects. (147)

In classical age, the aim was not to cure these people, as Foucault identifies; the notion was that “unchained bestiality could only be *tamed* or *trained*” (149). Different practices were applied in this period, such as blood transfusions, cold baths and corporal punishment. These people were chained and treated like savage animals. Some of the societies gathered the mad and carried them to other cities to get rid of them, while the others used confinement. What scared the societies most about the mad was not the mad people themselves; instead, the societies were afraid of the uncontrollable state which can cause chaos, because as Foucault states “madness was a *space of unpredictable liberty*” (151). The negative notion about madness has turned into something positive in Renaissance as it was associated with knowledge and in these periods madness was directly linked to the individual himself. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, its scope expanded and covered the society:

Madness, in the view of the eighteenth century, was a disease, not of nature nor of man himself, but of society. ... Madness was only ever of the order of a consequence, the product of a life that had strayed from the path of nature; it never called into question what was fundamental in man, his immediate belonging to nature. (Foucault, 2006a).

In the eighteenth century, madness was no more the disease of an individual, but of society; however, the essence of human, or the fundamentals in him, was not foregrounded yet. The inner dynamics of the people, the characteristics that made them who they were were still ignored. This is what Doctor Martin Dysart questions in the play “Equus”. At the very beginning of the play, he does not think that Alan will make such a great change in his life:

Dysart: What did I expect of him? Very little, I promise you. One more dented little face. One more adolescent freak. The usual unusual. One great thing about being in the adjustment business: you’re never short of customers. (Act I/2 21)

First, Dysart sees Alan as a customer; however, at the end of the play, he criticizes his own profession as it aims to create normal people who are purified from their passions. His job is to create a person who is normal, ignoring his characteristics and turning him into something lifeless:

Dysart: [*crying out*]: All right! I’ll take it away! He’ll be delivered from madness. What then? He’ll feel himself acceptable! What then? Do you think feelings like his can be simply re-attached, like plasters? Stuck on to other objects we select? *Look at him!* ...My desire might be to make this boy an ardent husband- a caring citizen- a worshipper of abstract and unifying God. My achievement, however, is more likely to make a ghost! (Act II/35 107)

The aim of the doctors is to create a stereotypical citizen who does not endanger the order established in the society and that’s the reason why madness has been seen as a danger more than a disease for ages. Dysart states “I’ll give him the good Normal world ... Passion you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created.” (Act II/35 108). He is aware of the fact that the institution he works for dehumanizes people by way of killing their strong passions and he is also aware of the fact that he himself is controlled by the same institution. “There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out” (Act II/35 109). In *Psychiatric Power*, which is a collection of the lectures given at the College De France in 1973 and 1974, Foucault suggests that:

[m]oreover, even the person in charge of a disciplinary system is caught up within a broader system in which he is supervised in turn, and at the heart of which he is himself subject to discipline. There is then, I think, an elimination of individualization at the top. (Foucault, 2006a)

Dysart is responsible for the asylum and the patients, but he is also in another and broader disciplinary system and everyone without exception is bound up with this system; however, it can be claimed that Dysart is the one who willingly lets the society put the chain in his mouth and Alan is the one who is forced to have it.

3. Analysis: The Concept of Power

The definition of power by Foucault is not restricted upon the oppressor and the oppressed as he focuses more on the subjects of power and how it operates within the society. In the quotation below taken from *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault draws attention to how power gets a hold on people by stating:

[w]hat is this power? I would like to advance the hypothesis that something like disciplinary power exists in our society. By this I mean no more than a particular, as it were, terminal, capillary form of power; a final relay, a particular modality by which political power, power in general, finally reaches the level of bodies and gets a hold on them, taking actions, behavior, habits, and words into account ... (Foucault, 2006a)

It can be stated that the power relations determine our behaviours, habits and the language we use. It penetrates into all kinds of relationships established within the boundaries of the society. In her book, *Michel Foucault*, Sara Mills puts forward that:

[t]hus, relations between parents and children, lovers, employers and employees – in short, all relations between people – are power relations. In each interaction power is negotiated and one's position in a hierarchy is established, however flexible, changing and ill-defined that hierarchy is. (Mills, 2003)

In all kinds of relationships, the power exercises and it can be claimed that the prerequisite of the existence of the power is the people and “Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, 2006a; Mills, 2003). Power cannot only be evaluated as something possessed by certain people, classes or institutions and Foucault criticizes that kind of understanding of power. However, he focuses on the disciplinary regimes and institutions as Mills states:

[h]is [Foucault's] work on disciplinary regimes is of great interest, since rather than simply seeing regimes as being oppressive, he analyses the way that regimes exercise power within a society through the use of a range of different mechanisms and techniques. He analyses a range of different institutions such as the hospital, the clinic, the prison and the university and sees a number of disciplinary practices which they seem to have in common. (Mills, 2003)

Mills highlights the fact that Foucault does not merely see the regimes and institutions as oppressors, but he analyzes them as they embody power relations profoundly. In his essay titled “Discipline and Punish”, Alan D. Schrift advises us to treat power in Foucauldian aspect:

... as a strategy rather than a property; as something exercised rather than possessed; as existing in relations rather than in things or persons; as in tension rather than contractually mediated; as operating at all levels of the socius, not just in the relations between state and citizens, or between classes, or between superiors and subordinates ... (Schrift, 2013)

To be able to analyse the concept of power, one needs to have a wide perspective, as it effects all relations from different levels of the society and people from all walks of life. The way the power operates in “Equus” will be analysed under two headings “The power relation between the doctor and the patient” and “The power relation within the family”.

a) The Power Relation between the Doctor and the Patient

Before analysing the power relation between the doctor and the patient, the setting, which lets the power circulate freely, should be examined. In *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault defines the link between power and hospital which is thought to be curing:

... it cures because the hospital is a panoptic machine, and it is as a panoptic apparatus that the hospital cures. The hospital is in fact a machine for exercising power, for inducing, distributing, and applying power according to Bentham's schema, even if, obviously, the specific architectural arrangements of Bentham's design are modified. (Foucault, 2006b)

The hospital itself has the high potential of producing power and with some tools it put to use, it manages to turn into a grand mechanism of power. In her essay, “Power and the Subject” Amy Allen points at the tools of asylum as follows: “[t]hese real processes of the asylum – work, the gaze, silence, recognition as mirror, and perpetual judgment – constituted a moral structure that was predicated on the organized guilt and shame of the madman” (Allen and Amy, 2013). The architecture of the hospitals and asylums allow power to float around and the subjects of power; the doctor and the patient cannot isolate themselves from the pervasive effect of power. In conventional perspective, the one who is subjected to power is the patient when the power relationship of the doctor and the patient is analyzed, however, in *Psychiatric Power* Foucault claims that:

[b]ut, of course, the doctor's power is not the only power exercised, for in the asylum, as everywhere else, power is never something that someone possesses, any more than it is something that emanates from someone. Power does not belong to anyone or even to a group; there is only power because there is dispersion, relays, networks, reciprocal supports, differences of potential, discrepancies, etcetera. It is in this system of differences, which have to be analyzed, that power can start to function. (Foucault, 2006b)

In “Equus”, it can be clearly observed that both the doctor and the patient are subjects of power. The case of Alan makes Dysart examine his own situation, his profession, his life and his marriage. The institution he works in is a place where power exercises negatively and he is aware of it. Dysart salutes Hester Salomon saying “[m]adam Chairman! Welcome to the torture chamber!” (Act I/2 19). This line gives us the idea that Dysart is not content with the place he works in. Actually, Dysart is trying to be compatible with the social norms, and on the surface he manages it; however, he is not the person he seems to be. His dream is highly symbolic and reveals all his fears: “That night, I had this very explicit dream. In it I'm a chief priest in Homeric Greece. I'm wearing a wide gold mask ... mask of Agamemnon. ... – the damn mask begins to slip ...” (Act I/5 24). He wears a mask in his dream and when the mask begins to slip, he is afraid of being displayed. The mask hides his true identity which is not compatible with the norms of the society. In the dialogue between Dysart and Hester, it can be seen that he yearns for a life full of passion:

All right, he's sick. He's full of misery and fear. He was dangerous, and could be again, though I doubt it. But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it. (Act II/25 82)

Dysart explicitly expresses his feelings exposed by Alan stating "... I'm jealous, Hester. Jealous of Alan Strang" (Act II/25 82). The passion that is not repressed in Alan makes Dysart envy him, as he gives up his passions to be a socially acceptable citizen.

The doctor or the psychiatrist is the figure of authority in hospitals/asylums; however, this does not mean that they are the only figures who impose power over others. When the sessions Alan and Dysart have had are examined, it can be seen that power changes hands. Dysart tries to establish rules and exert dominance, but Alan does not allow him to conduct the conversations. When Dysart asks him questions, he says: "I'll answer if you answer. In turns" (Act I/9 37), and he establishes the course of events, and it can be seen that Alan, the patient, gains the power. He not only seizes power, but also exploits it to disturb Dysart excessively, asking questions like "Do you fuck your wife?" He also makes inquiries about Dysart's wife and tells him "I know. Her name is Margaret. She's a dentist! You see, I found out!" (Act I/16 59). Dysart also asks some disturbing questions, yet this is something ordinary. What is extraordinary is the patient who examines the doctor and this situation accords with the notions of Foucault who claims that power is not possessed by some certain people or classes.

Dysart uses some strategies in his sessions with Alan and these strategies enable power to operate. Foucault defines the power exercised in asylum in *Psychiatric Power* as follows:

[n]ow the examples I have just given clearly prove that power as it is exercised in the asylum is a meticulous, calculated power, the tactics and strategies of which are absolutely definite. (Foucault, 2006b)

One of the strategies employed by Dysart is hypnotism. He tries to make Alan calm down and focus on the therapy; however, it is hard to convince Alan, as he is distracted easily. Dysart tries to draw his attention offering him a game:

Dysart: Would you like to play a game? It could make you feel better.

Alan: What kind?

Dysart: It's called Blink. You have to fix your eyes on something: say, that little stain over there on the wall—and I tap this pen on the desk. The first time I tap it, you close your eyes. The next time you open them. And so on. ... (Act I/19 64)

Alan likes the idea of games and plays them. The following lines by Dysart comfort Alan: "Now your eyes are feeling heavy. You want to sleep, don't you? You want a long, deep sleep. Have it. Your head is heavy. Very heavy. Your shoulders are heavy. Sleep" (Act I/19 65). As Dysart applies hypnotism and the placebo effect by offering Alan "truth pills", it can be claimed that power exercised within the asylum is a calculated power.

b) The Power Relation within the Family

Another institution where power controls and directs relationships is the smallest component of the society; family. The teacher exercises power over student, the doctor over patient, men over women and, in the family, the parents over the children. In "Equus" the negative effect of the parents of Alan cannot be ignored and as Foucault remarks in *Psychiatric Power*:

... in every family there are power relationships—which I would call the power of sovereignty, but it's not important—which are incompatible with the cure of madness for two reasons. The first is that, in themselves, these power relationships fuel the madness: ... Consequently, individuals must be deprived of the situation of power, of the points of support for their power in the family. (Foucault, 2006b)

Madness cannot be isolated from the power operating within the family, as it stirs up the madness. Foucault believes that "a psychiatric discourse" should be developed to find out "a discourse of truth" that is what lies beneath the madness (94). In this process, Foucault highlights the significance of the family with the words: "the family—family figures and family processes—is its fundamental object, target, and field of reference" (94). Dysart follows the same route and tries to analyze the parents, the relationship between them and their relation with Alan. The conversations between Dysart, Alan's mother Dora and his father Frank reveal how different the parents are. The conversation between Dysart and Frank discloses the extremely different notions of both parents in terms of religion:

Dysart: Would you say she was closer to him than you are?

Frank: They've always been thick as thieves, I can't say I entirely approve – especially when I hear her whispering that Bible to him hour after hour, up there in his room.

Dysart: Your wife is religious?

Frank: Some might say excessively so. Mind you, that's her business.

...

Dysart: And you're non-religious, I take it?

Frank: I'm an atheist, and I don't mind admitting it. If you want my opinion, it's the Bible that's responsible for all this. (Act I/7 33)

Dora is excessively religious and she tries to give her son a religious education at home reading Bible for hours to him. On the other hand, Frank is an atheist and he puts the blame on religion in Alan's case: "The boy was absolutely fascinated by all that. ... Bloody religion- it's our only real problem in this house..." (Act I/7 34). Dora is closer to her son, and she gives the sexual education, which is supposed to be given by the father to the son. Dysart

questions the sexual education of Alan as the crime he committed is somehow related to the issue of sex. Alan blinds the horses because they witness the failed sexual intercourse with Jill:

Dysart [*calmingly*]: Mr Strang, exactly how informed do you judge your son to be about sex?

Frank: [*tight*] I don't know.

Dysart: You didn't actually instruct him yourself?

Frank: Not in so many words, no.

Dysart: Did you, Mrs Strang?

Dora: Well, I spoke a little, yes. I had to. I've been a teacher, Doctor, and I know what happens if you don't.

They find out through magazines and dirty books. (Act I/7 34)

Dora states, "[t]hat sex is not just a biological matter, but spiritual as well. That if God willed, he would fall in love one day." (Act I/7 35). Her obsession with religion influences her views on sex, which in return influences Alan's psychosexual development. Feeling sexually attracted to horses makes Alan feel guilty because it does not conform to the dominant heteronormative ideology. Ertin (2012) states that "identity politics and heteronormative policies survive thanks to the contribution of individuals, even if unintentional" since individuals are not only objects configured by systems but also agents of those very systems (265). However, Frank is different from the mother, for he does not give any sexual education to his son and does not try to impose on him any sort of 'truth'. Their encounter at the porno theatre, as father and son, has destructive effects on Alan, and it is the same night that he blinds the horses. Frank is the figure of authority at home, setting up the rules at home, forbidding the TV, and criticizing Alan harshly by saying: "[y]ou sit in front of that thing long enough, you'll become stupid for life-like most of the population" [*to Alan*] (Act I/6 27). His father does not let him watch TV, but his mother lets him watch when Frank is not at home. Frank's tone is always critical and harsh; he accuses Alan: "You the son of a printer, and never opening a book! If all the world was like you, I'd be out of a job, if you receive my meaning!" (Act I/6 27). The words "if you receive my meaning" are repeated several times and Alan starts to use the exact words. The incident that happened when Alan was twelve years old proves the repressive characteristics of the father. It is about the painting hanging on Alan's wall and Dora tells the incident to the doctor:

Dora: It was a reproduction of Our Lord on his way to Calvary. ... My husband was very displeased.

Dysart: Because it was religious?

...

Dora: ... he went upstairs, tore it off the boy's wall and threw it in the dustbin. Alan went quite hysterical. He cried for days without stopping... (Act I/11 45)

Frank tears the painting off and causes Alan to have a nervous breakdown; then he hangs a new picture; a picture of a horse which has big eyes staring straight. Alan hates his father as he always tries to exert dominance over him. Even in his dream, Alan sees his father commanding him what to do and restricts his freedom. In the conversation between Dysart and Alan, Alan rises against him as he treats Alan like his father has treated him:

Dysart [*sitting*]: Tell me if you did.

...

Alan [*yelling*]: TELL ME!

[*All the masks toss at the noise.*]

Dysart: What?

Alan: *Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me!* ... On and on, sitting there! Nosey Parker! That's all you are! Bloody Nosey Parker! Just like Dad. On and on and bloody on! Tell me, tell me, tell me! ... Answer this. Answer that. Never stop!- (Act I/16 58)

The relationship of Alan with his parents is problematic, as his mother is intensely obsessed with religion and his father is unheeding. The way they treat Alan must have a lasting impression over Alan because the painting of the horse, which is replaced with the painting of Jesus Christ, makes him identify the God with the horse and he starts worshipping horses. However, the idea of being watched by the God, in the shape of the horses, is something Alan cannot handle. Both parents contribute to the madness of Alan and become object, target and the references. (Foucault, 2006b).

4. Conclusion

Michel Foucault is a very prolific philosopher and he has contributed greatly to the 20th century field of philosophy with his frameworks such as discourse analysis, genealogy, power-knowledge, subjectivation, and panopticism. In this article, the concept of madness and power are analyzed in the light of the works of Foucault. In *History of Madness*, he clarifies how madness was defined in different periods throughout the history and in *Psychiatric Power*, he defines how power is exercised in all kinds of relationships. "Equus" is a shuddery play with its content that is based on a true story; a young boy blinding six horses. The setting of the play is an asylum and this institution aims to create socially acceptable people. The power relation between the doctor and the patient proves the Foucauldian notion that power is not possessed by certain people or classes. It can be stated that even strong persons can be subjected to power. When the power relation within the family is examined, Foucault's idea that family is the reference of the madness can be confirmed. The parents of Alan, who are at odds with each other, ignite the madness in Alan. The mother tries to enforce a religious life and the father tries to assume dominance over him. Their attitude influences him negatively and causes him to develop an obsession with horses and blind six horses. It would be fair to claim that the concepts of madness and power in "Equus" accord with the statements of Foucault

profoundly.

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