

The Disciplining Mechanism of Power in Selected Literary Works by Albert Camus and Franz Kafka

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1 INTRODUCTION

Power is dispersed and pervasive, operating within all structures and institutions which govern, monitor and control the individual subject. Michael Foucault, the prominent French Modernist thus challenges the idea of power being wielded by people or groups by ways of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion. He identifies that, 'power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1998: 63).

Power operates within the structures and institutions of administration, authority and bureaucracy within the society. These institutions can be identified as the government, prison, school, church, factory, office, hospital and so forth. Foucault particularly focuses on how they help to discipline the individual.

In his *Discipline and Punish* Foucault identifies discipline as "an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (Foucault, 1979: 146). This discipline can transform individuals into 'docile bodies' which are spatially enclosed, partitioned, and ranked so as to maintain order and discipline. "The notion of 'docility', which joins the analyzable body to the

manipulable body" (Foucault, 1979: 136) can be regulated and controlled according to the power dynamics which are pervasive within social institutions. Thus, a body which is docile "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1979: 136) according to the rules and regulations in place within social institutions.

According to Foucault individuals are transformed into 'docile bodies' because they normalize these rules and regulations which seek to control them by self-disciplining themselves. He thus utilized the concept of the 'panopticon' in his *Discipline and Punish*, as a metaphor for modern "disciplinary" societies and their pervasive inclination to observe and normalize the individual.

Jeremy Bentham came up with the idea of a Panopticon (an institutional building) in the late 18th century to watch all the prison inmates, without them being able to know whether they are being watched. Consequently, Foucault developed 'Panopticism,' as a governing method to depict how the power within the social institutions control and govern the individual through means of surveillance and assessment. He identified these means of surveillance as an invisible disciplining gaze. This disciplining gaze can serve as a regulatory model to enforce self-

regulation by making individuals abide rules, regulations and cultural constraints propagated by the society.

This study examines the disciplining mechanisms of power which operate within the institutions of selected works by Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). It also gives an in-depth analysis of how social institutions exercise their overbearing authority to transform individuals into 'docile bodies' to control, normalize and suppress them. In addition to that, this study focuses on resistance to perceive how individuals who resist and rebel against these institutions are treated.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a textual examination and comparison of selected works by Kafka and Camus. These include Kafka's novel *The Trial* (1925) and his two short stories "The Judgment" and "A Hunger Artist" from *The Completed Short Stories of Franz Kafka* (1971). These also include Camus's novel *The Outsider* (1942) and his two short stories "The Renegade or A Confused Mind" and "The Guest" from *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957) which includes six influential short stories by Camus.

In order to theoretically substantiate my study, I am primarily analysing Michael Foucault's theoretical text *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to depict how the social theory "Panopticism," developed by Foucault as a form of governance, operates in Camus's and Kafka's stories. This is done by focusing on the "disciplining gaze," of the institutions of power which enables the controlling of individuals. I am also focusing on Foucault's concept of 'docile bodies' which are developed due to the disciplining mechanisms of the institutions of power in Camus's and Kafka's stories.

I am also using the philosophical essay "The Myth of the Sisyphus" (1942) by Albert Camus from the text *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1991) to study how Camus's heroes deal with the absurd. This is done by struggling and revolting against the institutions of power which determine their fates. Along with this I am also analysing Kafka's "Letter to my Father" (1966) from the text *Dearest Father* (2008) to analyze how Kafka's heroes react when faced with overwhelming power and authority. When Camus's heroes struggle and revolt against their existential crises, Kafka's heroes succumb to its devastating authority. I want to explain, compare and contrast this correlation.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The devastation, massive destruction and loss of lives during the two world wars, led to a shattering of faith, religion and the belief on God. People started questioning the meaning of life and the purpose of living. The lead to the development and popularity of existential and absurd philosophies during the 19th and 20th century. These philosophical doctrines regarded the world as irrational and absurd. They offered individuals means of finding meaning in life, during a chaotic time where essentialist views of humans being offered a predestined fate by God was questioned and problematized.

Kafka was a German writer who was born into a middle-class, German-speaking Jewish family in Prague. He was very much motivated to write existential and absurd heroes in literature as a response to the mass destruction during World War I, the sheer oppression of totalitarian regimes and his own psychological trauma of feeling powerless under the overwhelming authority of his father. Kafka's father was psychologically abusive to him during his childhood and governed his entire life. As a result, the fates of the characters in his work mirror



that of a victim under an authoritative system, institution or family just as Kafka felt powerless under the overwhelming power of his father – who was a “huge man” who wields “ultimate authority” over him (Kafka, 2008: 23). He thus feels a sense of powerlessness and shame often losing himself in despair. (Kafka, 2008: 23-24).

The French writer Camus was a leading writer for the anti-German resistance movement during World War II. He developed his philosophy of the absurd during the wartime in Paris as a response to the mass anxieties of losing the meaning in life during such a violent and chaotic time. In his “The Myth of Sisyphus” Camus says that, even when life has lost all meaning man should not seek escape in suicide. By incorporating the Greek legend of Sisyphus Camus says that, when faced with a tragic fate the absurd hero will struggle and revolt against it, instead of despairing with resignation. He says this gives the absurd hero his dignity: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1991: 78).

Power is exercised in such a way that, the disciplining of individuals assures their position of being ‘docile bodies’ under the power and authority of social institutions. The social institutions normalize this disciplining to an extent where the individual self-disciplines himself. In order to be exercised, power has to be given “the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible.” (Foucault 1979: 214) Power is thus a “faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network.” (Foucault, 1979: 214). Foucault further identifies that, the disciplining gaze of power operates within every social institution. He says that, “Is it surprising

that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault, 1979: 228).

Existential and absurd heroes can be found in both Camus’s and Kafka’s books. They experience and deal with the existential crises as they face life experiences in different ways. Though Camus refuses to be called an existentialist, his narratives offer heroes who are entangled in an existential crises. However Kafka and Camus have different interpretations on how to deal with this crisis. As all existential philosophers they see the world as absurd. In this absurd world they perceive their heroes are being restricted, suppressed and controlled by social institutions, power structures and governing mechanisms that are deeply entrenched within the society.

In Kafka’s *The Trial* the reader is presented with the absurdity of modern bureaucracy and the power and authority wielded by the institutions of a totalitarian state. From the very first chapter Josef K. the protagonist is condemned for reasons that are never explained within the narrative. “Somebody must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.” (Kafka, 2015:1) Through the perspective of Josef K. Kafka presents the overbearing power which is wielded by a totalitarian government. This power is so overwhelming that K. completely and utterly succumbs himself to the authority wielded by the “faceless gaze” (Foucault, 1979: 214) of the institutions. K. in the story exposes the great faceless organization within the judicial system which seek to manipulate and transform individuals into ‘docile bodies’ so that they obey all the rules and regulations imposed by the judicial institution. K. exposes the purpose of this great organization: “To arrest innocent persons and start proceedings against them which are pointless and mostly, as in my case, inconclusive.” (Kafka, 2015: 36-37). However K. still self-disciplines

himself in such a manner that, he normalizes this treatment and allows himself to be controlled under the power of the judicial institution.

However the protagonist in Camus's *The Outsider* does not accept such a defeatist ideology. Though he also perceives the absurdity of the institutions just like K. in *The Trial* he refuses to merely succumb to the fate which is imposed over him. Instead, Meursault the protagonist, rebels against the power and authority wielded by corrupted institutions by struggling and revolting against the disciplining mechanisms of the government. Meursault refuses to be transformed into a 'docile body' where he has to self-discipline himself to fulfill the moral duties and obligations of the society and the religious expectations of the church. Instead he confronts and rebels against the expectations which are imposed upon him by the overbearing power dynamics within the social institutions. "Why should the death of other people or a mother's love matter so much? Why should I care about his god, the lives, the destinies we choose when one unique destiny had chosen me" (Camus 2013: 109). This struggle and revolt gives Meursault dignity as an absurd hero in literature.

When the narrator of the short story "The Judgment" by Kafka says that "[m]y father is still a giant", (Kafka, 1983: 105) it heightens the narrator's lower rank as the father's overwhelming authority renders him to the position of powerless 'docile body.' Though the narrator has become an adult while his father has become old, frail and bedridden, the father's power is such that when he says, "I condemn you to death by drowning" (Kafka, 1983: 113) the narrator succumbs to the command and drowns himself. He is thus unable to break away from the domineering control of his father. The father's authority over the son can symbolically represent the overbearing and disciplining power of social institutions over the individual.

In the short story "The Guest" by Camus the school teacher Daru is ordered by the government to take a prisoner, an Arab to the police headquarters in Tinguit. However Daru frees the prisoner and gives him a choice to escape his fate or turn himself into the police. However in Daru's dilemma of his inability to take a decision himself, he seals his own fate as a warning is written on his blackboard which says, '[y]ou turned in our brother. You will pay' (Camus, 2006: 55). Daru is expected to self-discipline himself and obey the order which comes from the "faceless gaze" (Foucault, 1979: 214) of the government. However he resists against it. This resistance gives him dignity as he makes a choice, however he is still condemned to a tragic fate.

The artist in Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" practices his art by fasting. Even when the audience lose interest and forgets his presence he still continues to self-discipline himself and fast till his tragic death. His decision to fast is not out of his own choice but because of his involuntary rejection of life as life did not provide him the "food" he "liked." (Kafka, 1983: 309). As life did not offer him this fundamental need to survive, his art of fasting is the result of developing a 'docile body' which actually conforms to the "constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (Foucault, 1979: 136) imposed upon him by the society.

In Camus's "The Renegade or A Confused Mind" the absurd hero embraces the absurdity of his existence by abandoning all reason and logic. Camus in this story focuses his attention on the overbearing power of the institution of religion which condemns the renegade to a tragic death. The renegade in the story is indoctrinated by the church and goes as a Christian missionary to convert those of the closed city of Taghaza. However he forsakes his religion and is manipulated and disciplined to become a 'docile body' through violent means of torture until he finally becomes a loyal and obedient



follower of the power of ‘fetish’. He declares “[y]es, the fetish alone has power, he is the only god of this world, and hatred his commandment, the source of all life” (Camus: 2006, 27). Camus thus exposes the absurdity of the institutions of power which disciplines the renegade simply to condemn him to death at the end of the story.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Both Kafka and Camus criticize the disciplining mechanisms of overwhelming power structures such as bureaucracy, judicial authority, administration and religion. In my study I examined how the pervasive power within societal institutions disciplines, controls and manipulates individuals into ‘docile bodies’ who self-discipline themselves according to rules and regulations imposed upon them by the society. I conclude by suggesting that, both Kafka and Camus expose the absurdity, corruption and injustice of the pervasive power within social institutions and how they marginalize and victimize the individuals. Both writers deal with the disciplining mechanisms of power in different ways, as Kafka believes in succumbing to a tragic fate while Camus believes in struggling and revolting against a tragic fate before accepting it giving the absurd hero dignity, as modes of resistance. However both writers

expose how these disciplining mechanisms of power seek to self-discipline and conform the individual subject according to the rules and regulations of the society. Through this both Kafka and Camus make a powerful critique against the social institutions which oppress and control the individual.

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