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Foucault's Power Discourse and Morrison's The Beloved

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Abstract

Referring himself as an "experimenter", Foucault challenges many fundamental philosophical ideas in the Western tradition with a socio-historical approach. His power discourse theory, in particular, by reexamining power as a relational network that intertwines with economic, political, social and all other factors, reveals an immense power mechanism that enfolds all human societies in history. His understanding of power relations is, to some extent, vividly mirrored in Toni Morrison's novel The Beloved, where the author, by using a "language that drinks blood", presents the prevailing operation of power under the shadow of slavery. Morrison ruthlessly snatches readers into the atrocious Afro-American history and tries to regain power and discourse for the marginalized. By inquiring into Foucault's power discourse theory, this essay analyzes how dynamic power interactions between the white and the black play a central part in shaping the subjectivity of individuals and constructing history in Morrison's The Beloved.

Keywords

Foucault; Power discourse; The Beloved; Toni Morrison.

1. Introduction to Power Discourse Theory

"Discourse is power to be seized" is one of the most influential statements made by Micheal Foucault in his inaugural lecture The Order of Discourse (1970). According to Foucault, power and discourse are intrinsically inseparable from each other, interacting and merging together to form a unity that functions as an overwhelming mechanism to generate affects on reality.

As Foucault argues, power is dispersed and invasive in its essential attribute. Intruding into all walks of life and every corner of human society, power is everywhere "not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere"—public organizations, institutions, individuals, etc. In this way, Foucault mount a definitive challenge to western traditional conception of power and his works evoke scholars to rethink what lies underneath that absolute "one power". For him, "power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them." (Gaventa 2003:1) Accordingly, it can be inferred that power does not exist as a totality, but rather a network of relationships. "I hardly ever use the word 'power', and if I do sometimes, it is always a short cut to the expression I always use: the relationships of power." (Taylor 3) .

Though to some extent, power entitles discourse to be voiced and heard, discourse is more than the carrier of power. Discourse in itself is a kind of power that can produce effects and shape power. Discourse must be taken as a “violence” human beings impose on things, which is necessarily blends with all human factors. Thus, discourses not merely exchange language contents; what really matters in discourses are “who made it” and “how it is made”. As a result, discourse is attributed the tendency of duality, for it is both the means of oppressing and the means of resistance. Just as Foucault said: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.”

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2. A Foucauldian Reading of The Beloved

2.1. Manifestation of Power Relations

In novel The Beloved, Morrison presents more than one opposition of power under the general context of slavery and post-slavery, including the power of the white over the black, of men over women, and of parents over children, etc. Among these power oppositions or relations, Morrison focus mostly on the unbalanced position between the black and the white, for although slavery as an institution was officially abolished in the year 1863, slavery as a discourse of ideology still persisted and prevailed for a long historical period. Powers can be manifested and exercised in different ways, namely repressing power, disciplinary power and normalizing power.

In The Beloved, Morrison appears to depict the power relation between slaveholders and slaves primarily as a relationship of repression, which often comes along with physical violence and threat: male slaves are to be beaten for any disobedience, female slaves are to be "rode on" for ravishment, pregnant slaves are to be "sucked" by a strong arm, and even new-born babies are to be forcefully carried off from the mother once being born with Beloved as a typical example.

This kind of repressive power, however, is only second-rank in that even though it could force the subordinated to do the bidding against their personal wills, they are not really in control and the need to apply repression implies a failure. As a matter of fact, power is not necessarily repressive and constraining, it can be productive and generative. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of A Prison, Foucault asserts that:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault 194)

Hence, disciplinary power, as opposed to repressive power, is the first-rank power and serves as an effective manifestation for the productivity of power. Disciplinary power gives rise to new norms of behaviors and practices, usually distinguished for its subtle application of various "strategies" and "techniques" onto individuals (Discipline and Punish 215). In The Beloved, Sweet Home is not sweet at all. It is exactly the place where disciplinary power operates most frequently in sustaining the normality of plantation and shaping black slaves as objects and instruments. It operates in the way similar to a "panopticon prison", a metaphor made by Foucault referring to various institutions that supervise and regulate individuals with panoramic surveillance (Discipline and Punish 195). Schoolteacher sets a whole set of rigid rules and punishments to manage his slaves. The strategy he takes tends to be scientific, including inquiring them, measuring them, and teaching lessons to his pupils the "animal characteristics" of slaves (Morrison 193). The former slaveholder Mr. Garner, in comparison, is seemingly rather mild and considerate. He manages to tame slaves to live a life of labor and obedience without surveillance or punishment. His strategy of generosity and paternalism, however, are simply the watered-down version of the schoolteacher's, numbing his slaves as narcotics in living a regular slave life and ignore their identity as an independent individual.

Therefore, in a broader sense, this kind of disciplinary power can be categorized as a normalizing power, which functions in not only monitoring and manipulating black slaves, but also making them feel a necessity to do what they have to do anyway and a regularity to behave as what they are required to. As a result of long-time practice of such power, ideas imposed to those slaves are gradually internalized, consciously or unconsciously, by themselves. Thus, when Sixo tries to make good excuse for his stealing a shoat, he objectifies himself for forgiveness: "Improving your property, sir." "Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better

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chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work."(Morriosn 190)

2.2. Construction of Individual Subjectivity

As a matter of fact, in Foucault's theory, power and discourse always concerns individuals, and subjectivity of individual is regarded as a mixture product of socio-historical process. As for Afro-Americans, they share a painful historical self-constitution process in forming their subjectivity. The Beloved, by retelling a series of stories in American history, reveals how the subjectivity of Afro-Americans has been shaped through practices and experiences.

At the very beginning, their subjectivity is formulated with a strong sense of alienation. To begin with, they are alienated for the deprivation and prohibition of personal attachment, intimate parentage and family affections. Married black women, like Baby Suggs, are not allowed to use "my husband" in reference to their partner, simply because their marriages are not recognized in law. Thus a husband could only be a "husband she claimed" and their marriage is only a "manner of speaking"(Morrison 142). Even worse, the black often feel a strong alienation from themselves. Their individual identity has been diminished and destroyed once they are transported through the Middle Passage and ruthlessly thrown into plantations one after another; what is left to them is more about their subhuman parts. This explains why Seth's mother once asked her daughter to know her by the "mark" on her body rather than her face (Morrison 61). This mark itself is a feature for slavery and servitude, but she could solely depend on this label to identify and distinguish herself, which implies a loss of self-identity and a sense of self-alienation.

More strikingly, as the white are constantly interacting and battling with the black, their original subjectivity also inevitably experiences a distortion. Exorbitant exercise of their power and authority has not only planted a "jungle grew inside" under every dark skin, but also made "themselves bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be." (Morrison 199) In other words, slavery witnessed an irreversible transformation of all human subjects under it, both the ones deprived of power and the ones deriving power from it.

Despite the fact that human subjectivity is subject to powers, there is still a possibility for resistance within power relations. In History of Sexuality, Foucault argues that where there is power, there is a necessity of resistance, and this resistance is in a position of interiority in relation to power (95). Power is predicated by the resistance within itself and resistance is always co-extensive with power. Therefore, the slavery is established and operates on the basis that the white are right in the position of power while the black are in the position of resistance.

In the story, those long been powerless and voiceless black population shows their way of resistance through their own discourse. As Foucault said, discourses related to power in a complicated way: "Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (The History of Sexuality 101). For the first time, Baby Suggs asks Mr. Garner why they all call her Jenny. When realizing that Jenny is a name from her sales ticket, she shows her personal denial: "Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."(Morrison 142) The fact that her attempt to claim for the right of what being called represents her preliminary awareness of resistance for self-identity.

Furthermore, discourse can be also a practice that carries and generates power in a more violent way. As for Seth, the murder of baby shows her desperation and her resolution for resistance. In the face of endless exploitation and brutality of slavery, she has no choice but to fight for her power and voice by any kind of mean, even at the cost of bloody violence. In ending her baby's life, she is making an escape from slavery and preventing her child from a same miserable fate. Therefore, though seemingly insane or mad, "she ain't crazy". "She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter." (Morriosn 234)

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The possibility of resistance within power relations could further give rise to a pursuit of freedom. It is noteworthy that freedom is not on the face-to-face confrontational position with power; instead, they are "mutually exclusive in a more complicated interplay". (Foucault, The Subject and Power 221) Though refusing a completely "free" subject that could think and act entirely by personal reason and will, Foucault believes solidly in human freedom. Based on his theory, freedom is a practice, a mode for the exercise of power rather than a goal or an ideal state to be achieved. Hence, the black men and women could still explore their own condition of freedom despite the profound influence of slavery.

Paul D buries all memories of physical and emotional tortures as a slave in the "rusted tobacco tin" of his heart, moves to search for his own source of manhood and self-worth, and ultimately manages to restore an ordinary life with Seth and grow to assume his own responsibility as a real man. While Paul D stands for the last generation who have once lived an atrocious slave life and struggled to fight back, Denver represents a younger generation who shall be able to find a new self and new life in the American society. Suck in the plight that her mother and sister are wakening day after day, Denver steps out of 124 to "have a new self to look our for and preserve" (Morrison 297). In the end, Denver has successfully transformed from an isolated and introverted girl into an independent individual in the society, who has decent work to do and obtains dignity and value in the community and society. Her pursuit of independence and freedom to some extent embodies Morrison's wishes for all African Americans.

2.3. Reconstruction of African-American History

In the long process of human history, individuals of different power positions are always fighting, striving, competing, each trying to gaining more power, discourse, and authority in telling their own version history. As a result, under the power discourse mechanism, "history is the complex interrelationship of a variety of discourses" (Brassier, Literary Criticism 113) All kinds of power relations play a pivotal role in the formulating history, and usually, the ones of dominant power position generate mainstream discourse to maintain their own established status by marginalizing the disadvantaged and repressing their voice.

The Beloved can be understood as a neo-slave narrative, in which Morrison retells the painful "rememory" of Afro-Americans and their stories after the abolishment of slavery. (Sathyaseelan. J) Noticeably, the description for the white's newspaper implies that what to be heard by the society and what to be remembered in the history were all under the control of power and discourse:

“There was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear...since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated...It would have to be...something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. ”(Morrison 155)

In other words, personal experiences of millions of slaves are only to be ruthlessly disregarded and forgotten in the history; thus history becomes a history to be claimed and truth becomes a truth to be legitimated. Therefore, Morrison tires to invite more voices from this silenced population by shifting from different points of view. The most astonishing expression about their bloody history is narrated by the reborn baby Beloved. Murdered by her mother, she has been violently deprived of the right to live, let alone the right to articulate a single voice. But she is brought back to life to regain her power, discourse and love, and to remind everyone of the truthful bloody past. Therefore, the resurrection of Beloved is more than a Gothic plot; it symbolizes her intention to regain the lost voice and power for herself and her people—millions of black slaves died because of Middle Passage and all kinds of torments—"sixty million and more". In a word, Beloved symbolizes a national trauma deep rooted in the

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African Americans and a painfully depressing recollection of the past haunting around the land of America.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Faucoult's power discourse theory establishes a prevailing and overwhelming mechanism where all kinds of power relations interlace with each other in producing reality and shaping individual subjectivity and human history. Morrison's novel The Beloved reflects how such power relations operate in American history, especially by providing an alternative picture for the story where the white and the black are interrelated and struggled with each other. This long process of dynamic power interaction has also witnessed a period of history, during which those African Americans resist against the dominant power and discourse, struggle and reacquaint with themselves and ultimately make efforts to seek their own version of freedom in this American society.

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