

**Discourse and Power in William Shakespeare's  
*The Tempest*: A Foucauldian Reading**

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**Abstract**

The research attempts to shed light on the concept of discourse and power in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It adopts Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and power, a concept that frequently appears in his pioneering works such as *The Archeology of Knowledge* and "The Order of Discourse". Foucault believes that discourse and power are inseparable. The research affirms that discourse is symptomatic of the concept of power from the viewpoints of the governor and the governed.

**1. Introduction:**

Discourse is an effective medium used by human beings to convey their opinions, orientations and feelings. There is certainly no placeholder for discourse, for it is viewed as the main vehicle for human communication. It unfolds the individuals' personality and what they intend to express in precise terms. In fact, discourses have at their nucleus an ideological dimension which underscores the significance of influence and subjection<sup>1</sup>. In poststructuralist studies, discourse has been a much heated focus of interest. Poststructuralists have approached discourse from widely divergent perspectives.

The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is one of the most outspoken harbingers of post structuralism. His studies tackle "the effects of discourse in forms of

subjection which prevail and come to control...”<sup>2</sup>. He put forward his conceptions in different writings. In his famous book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault set forth the idea that knowledge and power are intimately connected. Such connectedness is conceived in the belief that knowledge brings about power which is practised through the medium of discourse<sup>3</sup>. He states that discourse is “a series of sentences or propositions and it can be defined as a large group of statements that belong to a single system of formation”<sup>4</sup>, which he calls ‘discursive formation’. Discursive formations are the rules that govern the way of thinking, knowledge and the practice of particular historical stage. They refer to the whole corpus of utterances that handle a certain field of intellectual activity such as the human sciences, sexology, penology, and psychiatry<sup>5</sup>. Such institutions, to use Foucault’s term, are regarded as the jumping-off place for Foucauldian thought. Discourse is placed in the social power and practices in these institutions. Here discourse is exploited in an endeavour to form a kind of control upon people and to know how they think and behave under specific circumstances.

In a well-known lecture entitled “The Order of Discourse”(1970), Foucault argues that the production of discourse stipulates the presence of a series of procedures:

**...in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality<sup>6</sup>.**

The procedures Foucault attaches great importance to are exclusion, doctrine, discipline and social appropriations<sup>7</sup>.

Procedures such as these stand at the centre of the Foucauldian concept of discourse and their absence renders discourse ineffective and difficult. The true discourse creates the power being sought for whether it is social, political or individual.

More pertinent is Foucault's view of the economy of discourse. Any stretch of discourse must be marked by economy of statements, a feature that gives discourse its power if available<sup>8</sup>. Barry Allen argues that what makes a statement pass among others as true is knowledge. The deep knowledge of how discourse must be produced undoubtedly conduces to power<sup>9</sup>. Through close knit discursive formations, power reveals itself most obviously. The more economic these formations are, the more effective their meanings become. Power or authority springs from the economy of discourse, because a statement, however short it is, may be something better than a magniloquent oration.

The final point to be made here is that the true discourse is the one which causes 'respect and terror', since it ends in domination<sup>10</sup>. Such a kind of discourse is preferred by Foucault, for it carries with it the concept of power in all its entirety.

## **2. Discourse and power in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:**

From a historical perspective power was one of the distinctive features of Shakespeare's age. It took a large margin of argumentation in his plays and hence it became a pivotal subject in Shakespeare. He makes frequent allusions to power, authority or government. Authority shows itself quite obviously in the Shakespearean text as a matter of voicing and this is the Shakespearean historicification of power stage<sup>11</sup>. In handling such a vital subject he intended to address the people of his age.

Thereupon, *The Tempest* is a play that runs in the same direction. It displays how power is lost and how it must be restored. The situation the play has is a political one. It is grounded in

Prospero's speech about how his brother Antonio betrays him when he informs Miranda, his sole and beautiful daughter, of this bitter experience:

**My brother, and thy uncle, call'd Antonio,  
I pray thee, mark me, that a brother should  
Be so perfidious ! – he whom next thyself  
Of all the world I lov'd, and to him put  
The manage of my state<sup>12</sup>.**

**(Act I, sc., ii, p.,13)**

The meaning of this speech is quite obvious. Prospero has been out of political power as a duke of Milan. He here feels heartbroken because of Antonio's usurpation of the throne. He has trusted him with authority. Yet, it is too late when he discovers that Antonio is not entitled for such confidence.

The word "power" and its equivalents are repeatedly mentioned by Prospero and other characters, a repetition that affirms Shakespeare's interest in the subject of power. Right at the very beginning of *The Tempest* power is foreshadowed in the boatswain's words to Gonzalo, an honest old councilor, "use your authority". Such a phrase underlies Gonzalo's power to save the people on the ship from the angry sea, thereby giving his orders to his men to take the ship to the safe seashore. Elsewhere, Prospero states that he was someday "the Duke of Milan, and A prince of power" (Act I, sc., ii, p.12). These two and other examples refer to the framework within which the play is set.

Prospero, the rightful disposed ruler, is not in a position to endure patiently the fact that he is currently ruled by a host of uncongenial conditions after he has been the ruler for years. In his view there exists a world of difference between the governor and the governed. He is, therefore, resolved to restore those olden days by experimenting all possible means, good or foul. Prospero's cooperation with Ariel, the supernatural creature, doubtless

indicates his desire for returning to power. He has at his disposal the power of the supernatural to meet his lust for power.

The political power in *The Tempest* doesn't work in detachment from other Kinds of power. The patriarchal power is one of these kinds to point out. Needless to say, the discourse Prospero usually employs is a discourse of persuasion, of having many people share his efforts to regain his lost power. He starts to exercise great influence over the circle of his acquaintance, attempting to conscript people as much as he can. Miranda is the first to join her father. She cannot turn down his request, because she must "obey and be attentive" (Act I, sc. i. p, 11). In the world of patriarchy, there must be a blind obedience to fathers. Miranda ought to take sides with Prospero who is exercising his patriarchal power. Miranda in turn finds herself in sympathy with Prospero "A lack for pity" (Act I, sc. ii, p.17).

Prospero is a man of argument and an educated man, a characteristic which grants him the ability to use certain discursive structures in manipulating others. He is enabled by this personal trait to serve his ends which are reflected in the reawakening of the harmony required at the human and political levels<sup>13</sup>. Differently stated, this permits him much assistance to skillfully address and convince others of the ideas he holds. He successfully takes avail of this ability to bring himself back to the throne. In this manner he vanquishes his enemies and consolidates his relationship with lovers. Hence, knowledge generates power.

In Foucauldian terms, Prospero's island is a good example of both a social and political institution, an institution which explains how discourse and power are interrelated. Prospero's discursive formations give him the edge over his counterparts. Through his discourse he leaves others in no doubt about his credibility. He first tries to build a utopia of his own on the island to which he is an alien. He seems to be forgetting that inhabiting in an island

belonging to the natives will be confronted with strong opposition, for it is out of logic to take a place forcefully. He excludes the natives from their homeland. In itself, this policy of exclusion leads to opposition. This opposition on the island is headed by Caliban, a deformed slave to Prospero, who believes himself to be the defender of the islanders.

In Act II Caliban's complaining of Prospero's tyranny is crystallized. He has been fed up with his master's mistreatment and thus is resolved to revolt against him. He becomes dehumanized especially when Prospero tells him "come forth, I say! there's another business for thee; come, thou tortoise" (Act II, sc. ii, p. 29-30). His total submission to Prospero's commands indicates his passivity "I must obey; his art is of such power" (Act I, sc. ii, p.33). His role in the play lies in the fact that it illuminates by contrast the world of art, nurture and civility<sup>14</sup>. He represents the primitive and Prospero the civilized. He bears Prospero an unspeakable abhorrence through Prospero's ill-behaved government.

Additionally, Caliban expresses his fears of Prospero's character very clearly. Prospero's power is strongly felt whether he is present or not. Caliban calls curses down on Prospero saying:

**All the infections that sun sucks up  
From bogs, fens, flat, on Prosper fall, and make  
him**

**By inch-meal, a disease! his spirits hear me,  
And yet I needs must curse. But they'll nor pinch,  
Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me the mire,  
No lead me, like a freehand in the dark,  
out of my way unless he bid 'em... .**

**(Act, II. sc. ii. p. 61).**

What can be termed power terror is textually structured here. People have obsessive fears whenever the governor is mentioned, due to the fact that the world of politics is set against that of

common people. There are certain taboos or forbidden borders that no one has the right to come across. Caliban's attack against Prospero shows one of the characters' reactions to Prospero's actions, an attack that can be seen as "the manifestation of their life, a sign of the limits of authority and authorship, of a slippage in control...".<sup>15</sup> In the Elizabethan times the governor was given a deified image, because he was the representative of the divine decree on earth. Hence, even with Prospero absent, Caliban fears that Prospero can have an effect of some sort.

A related point is that discourse can take two forms. It is an instrument and an effect of power on the one hand. On the other, it is also a way of hindrance, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy<sup>16</sup>. Seen in this context, Caliban's earlier mentioned speech gets to the root of this point. He indicates his fears of Prospero's power and his opposition to Prospero. It is a kind of negative resistance to Prospero. Shortly afterwards, he announces the same idea. "A plague upon the tyrant that I serve", I'll bear him no more sticks.." (Act II, sc. ii, p. 67). He therefore plans to conspire against Prospero with the help of Trinculo, a jester, and Stephano, a drunken butler. As soon as they agree to join the conspiracy, Caliban becomes so pleased to the extent that he utters a shout of extreme joy "Freedom, high-day ! high-day, freedom! Freedom, high-day, freedom" (Act II, sc. ii, p. 69).

No suspicion can be cast upon Caliban's justification for plotting against Prospero. His conspiracy comes from the fact that Prospero's authoritative discourse with others is emblematic of his unjust domination. The islanders feel themselves rather marginalized or excluded, a matter that pushes the conspirators to dismantle Prospero of his power. Such power is embodied in his magical ability. They first have to "Burn but his books", because "He's but a sot" without these books. Stephano tells the audience

that "I will kill this man: his daughter and I will be king and queen..." (Act III, sc. ii, p. 82).

Throughout Prospero exploits his supernatural agents to exercise power through magic. He is totally in the know that Antonio, Sebastian and others have arrived the island and hence he holds himself responsible for taking revenge upon them. His discursive style takes the tone of superiority and domination. To show his power before Miranda and her fiancée Ferdinand, Prospero orders Ariel to bring other spirits immediately. Quite ironically, he obliges his spirits to carry out his orders even though he himself takes power from these creatures. Towards the end of Act IV, his political and authoritative discourse becomes quite clear where he tells Ariel about the conspirators' reaction to the failure of their plot:

**Ariel:**

**Hark, they roar!**

**Prospero: Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour**

**Lies at my mercy all mine enemies:**

**Shortly shall all my labors end, and thou**

**Shalt have the air at freedom: for a little**

**Follow, and do me service.**

**(Act IV. sc. i. p. 111)**

Even with the absence of his enemies, Prospero pins great hopes on power. He appears extremely overwhelmed with power and with the desire for power.

As time makes further progress, it is self – evident that Prospero's authoritative discourse is reduced to a discourse of forgiveness. He no longer believes in the power of the magic "I'll drown my book" (Act V. sc. i. p.116). He decides to free all his detainees and forgive them:

***Though with their high wrong I'm struck to the quick,***

**Yet with my nobler reason giants my fury,**

**Do I take part: the rarer action is  
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,  
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend  
Not a frown further, Go release them, Ariel  
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,  
And they shall be themselves.**

(Act V, sc. i. p.114)

Prospero here has all the loose ends tied up. He doesn't broad on the idea of revenge, since it ends in nothing. Reason takes the place of passion. Consistent with this sense of forgiveness and reconciliation is Prospero's reception of Gonzalo and Alonso. In this encounter he is portrayed as having particular merits such as humility, kindness, and an undertone of egalitarian nature. The dialogue between these characters affirms this point:

**Prospero:**

**Behold, sir king,**

**The wronged Duke Milan, Prospero:  
For more assurance that a living Prince  
Does now speak to thee, I embrace thy body; And to  
thee and thy company I bid  
A hearty welcome.**

**Alonso:**

**Whether thou best he or no,  
Or some enchanted trifle to abuse me,  
As late I have been, I not know; thy pulse  
Beats, as of flesh and blood; and since I saw thee,  
The affliction if my mind a mends, with which  
I fear, a madness held me: this must crave  
And if this be at all – a most strange story.  
Thy dukedom I resign.**

(Act V, sc. i, p.199)

Overall, discourse is expressive of peoples' mode of thought which is an indispensable instrument in life. In *The Tempest*, it is seen as a complementary thing to power. It shows the governor's actions and the reaction of the governed. When Prospero is met, his discourse is extremely marked by threat, superiority and revenge. Subsequently, it becomes a discourse of forgiveness and humbleness. Such a transformation affirms that power is kept intact if the language of justice and moderation is followed. Also, the remaining characters' discourse indicates their fierce opposition to Prospero's rule. The Shakespearean dramatic text always contains within itself the vocalization of the power in one way or another. What is important is that power must bring the social and the political to good terms.

#### Notes

- 1- Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse*, (London : Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 101.
- 2- Macdonell, p. 113.
- 3- As quoted by Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (London : Routledge, 2003), pp. 153-4.
- 4- Bertens, p. 154.
- 5- Alan Swingewood, *Sociological Poetics and Aesthetic Theory*, (London : The Macmillan Press LTD, 1986), p. 136.
- 6- Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse", *Untying The Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*, ed. By Robert Young. (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 52.
- 7- For more details about these procedures, see Foucault, pp. 56-71.
- 8- Ryan Peterson, "Michel Foucault: Power/ Knowledge", <http://www.colostate.edu/speech/rccs/theory54htm> (retrieved in 2006), p. 3.
- 9- Peterson, p. 3.

- 10-Foucault, p.54.
- 11-Jonathan Goldberg, “Shakespearean Inscriptions” the Voicing of Power”, *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey (London : Methuen, 1985), p. 119.
- 12-All quotations from *The Tempest* are taken from *The Tempest*, ed. by Frank Kermode, (London : Methuen and Co LTD, 1971). *Further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.*
- 13-Kermode, Introduction, p. xviii.
- 14-K R Srinivasa Iyengar, *Shakespeare: His world and His Art*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, P. 1984), p. 604.
- 15-Goldberg, p. 133.
- 16-Foucault, p. 51.

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### المخلص

يحاول هذا البحث تسليط الضوء على مفهوم الخطاب والسلطة في مسرحية وليام شكسبير "العاصفة"، ويتبنى هذا البحث مفهوم الفيلسوف والمؤرخ الفرنسي ميشيل فوكو للخطاب والسلطة وهو مفهوم يتكرر ظهوره في كتاباته المعروفة مثل كتاب "حفريات اللغة" ومقالته "نسق الخطاب" ويعتقد فوكو ان الخطاب والسلطة لا يمكن الفصل بينهما. ويؤكد البحث ان الخطاب هو معبر عن مفهوم السلطة من خلال جهتي نظر الحاكم والمحكوم.