

Power-knowledge Nexus, Doctor-Patient Relationship and Representation of Madness- a study of the novel *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Abstract

The paper is a study of Foucauldian idea of the Power-Knowledge nexus with respect to caretaker/ patient relationships in the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's nest* and its film adaptation bearing the same title. The paper takes into account the depiction of mental illness in two other works, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and the film "A Beautiful Mind"(2001). The study is made against the background of the reading of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*(1967). By way of various examples drawn from the above mentioned works the paper tries to analyse the depiction of caretaker-patient relationship and doctor patient relationship on the power/knowledge axis. It argues that knowledge-power nexus is very crucial to the understanding of mental illness in fact gender too plays a very significant role in the power relations thus formed.

Key words: Madness, Psychiatry, Foucault, Knowledge-Power, gender, Patient-caretaker, Mental trauma

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The paper will try to understand the Foucauldian idea of the Power-Knowledge nexus with respect to caretaker/ patient relationships in the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's nest*. The paper takes into account the depiction of mental illness in two other works, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and the film A Beautiful Mind(2001). The study is made against the background of the reading of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*(1967)

Madness And Civilization – A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (1967) traces the way in which madness has been constructed, perceived, understood and judged through history

beginning with the age of reason. Madness, Foucault demonstrates, must be understood against a backdrop of Reason, and as a medical historian he traces the treatment, perceptions and notions associated with the mental ailments beginning with the age of reason. Foucault's aim is to understand the roles that reason has taken as a social practice in our civilization. Although he does not overtly talk about the relationship between power and knowledge in this work but the debate is implicitly worked out. Here, Foucault questions the idea of human reason and knowledge with respect to madness, its treatment and the supposed cure. He draws our attention towards the medicalisation of madness, i.e. the categorization of madness as mental illness and the power equations formed thereby.

But some questions arise-

When we talk about the power knowledge nexus, how far is it appropriate to associate it with a well established knowledge system like western medicine and its treatment of mental ailments?

How far does the doctor's power over the patient interfere with the patient's self-assessment and self esteem?

What are the implications of the gendered language over the representations of mental illness?

With the help of examples in the above mentioned novel and films the paper will try to delve into the power knowledge nexus and the depiction of doctor patient relationship in case of mental illness.

Introduction: Madness and Civilization and the Knowledge/Power Nexus

To begin with, one has to understand that for Foucault, madness is a very wide category. Apart from people fit to be called pathologically mentally unsound, i.e. the people with melancholia, mania etc, he also includes the figure of the fool with an innocent idiocy and also the Quixotic figure, who cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal. This way he sets the premise to later on question the dichotomy between madness and sanity, the unreasonable and the reasonable.

Similarly, the concept of Knowledge for Foucault is multidimensional, which he studies at length in his later works like, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of Human Sciences*. But in case of psychiatry, Foucault distrusts the credibility of such knowledge itself, to the extent of calling it a "dubious" science:

Foucault says in one of his interviews,

"If concerning a science like Physics or Organic Chemistry, one poses a problem of its relations with the political and economic structures of the society, isn't one posing an excessively complicated question? Doesn't this set the threshold of possible explanations very high? But on the other hand, if one takes a form of knowledge like psychiatry, won't the question be much easier to resolve, since the epistemological profile of psychiatry is a low one and psychiatric practice is linked with a whole range of institutions, economic requirements and political issues of social regulations. Couldn't the interviewing of effects of Power and knowledge be grasped in case of a science as dubious as psychiatry?" (Gordon, 2015: 108)

Charting out the images of madness and its treatment(s) across ages, Foucault points out that it was in the 18th and the 19th centuries that the treatment of madness significantly changed. While it was physical torture and confinement in the past, now it became a form of mental oppression, with the coming of psychologists like Pinel and Tuke.

Furthermore, by the 20th century, these disciplinary tactics were validated by a medical enterprise, thereby making the oppression even more severe.

He then problematises the doctor- patient relationship in a positivist worldview. The doctor becomes a thaumaturge, a magician like figure with his authority borrowed from morality. He says,

“It was thought, and by the patient first of all that it was in the esotericism of his (doctor’s) knowledge, in some almost daemonic secret of his knowledge, that the doctor has found the power to unravel insanity”(Foucault, 2001: 261).

Post Freud, this authority is amplified and upheld, the psychoanalyst, the doctor may be silent but his is the ultimate presence, a “quasi divine status” (Foucault, 2001: 263). Thus with the medicalisation of the treatment of madness, the power of the physician increased.

Representation of Madness in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Taking these views in mind we can now look at the representation of madness in works of fiction, and see how far his observations hold true.

The novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*(1962) offers a very strong critique to clinical psychiatry. Published not long before *Madness and Civilisation*, it addresses the same issues as the latter. Ken Kesey’s own interest in altered consciousness under the influence of LSD led him to accept a position in a mental hospital. He worked in a mental asylum and his own job provided him with real life instances and mannerisms of people who became models for the various characters he shows in his novel. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of a paranoid schizophrenic named Chief Bromden, who pretends to be deaf and mute in order to keep himself isolated.

The patients are classified either as Acutes or Chronics. The Acutes are curable and are staying voluntarily in the hospital for fear of facing the outside world. The Chronics on the other hand have undergone medical procedures like electroshock therapy or lobotomy and are permanently confined to the mental asylum having been rendered “docile”. The head caretaker, Ms. Ratched is authoritative, controlling and ruthless when it comes to dealing with patients who do not obey her. She knows her patients’ fears and insecurities and subtly challenges them time and again.

Kasey describes her thus,

“The Big Nurse recognizes this fear and knows how to put it to use; she’ll point out to an Acute, whenever he goes into a sulk, that you boys be good boys and cooperate with the staff policy which is engineered for your *cure*, or you’ll end up over on *that* side.” (Kasey,2012 :18)

Her authority is severely detested by the new entrant in the ward, McMurphy, a petty criminal who is apparently mentally sound but probably escaping the hard prison work for the minor sentence he is convicted for. Kasey keeps it ambiguous whether or not he has a mental ailment. Here lies the irony: this not only highlights the inadequacy of the field of Psychiatry as a science, but one is also forced to think about the very distinction between madness and sanity. While it is still left unclear in the novel, in its adaptation of the movie it is clear to the viewers that McMurphy is not ill. In one of the scenes, the doctor tells McMurphy that he doesn't think that he suffers from a mental illness. To this McMurphy makes a funny face and asks the doctor if a mental patient has to appear different in order to prove his madness. The question, although uttered by McMurphy, to cover up for himself borders upon the philosophical question Foucault asks us- how deviant is a person supposed to be, in order to be called a mentally ill patient. Are appearances the only proof for a deviation?

We are introduced to different mental patients, most of who stay in the mental asylum voluntarily, for fear of facing the outside world. They do not know what they get their medication for, but they cannot evade it, for fear of severe punitive measures. The head nurse, also known as the "big nurse" though calm and composed, is unyielding to the emotional needs of the patients. Exemplifying the Foucauldian positivist doctor, she subtly humiliates the patients in the name of therapy and the patients do not have the power to protest. She sees McMurphy as a threat from the very beginning.

"The Big Nurse tests a needle against her fingertip. "I'm afraid"—she stabs the needle down in the rubber-capped vial and lifts the plunger—"that is exactly what the new patient is planning: to take over. He is what we call a 'manipulator,' Miss Flinn, a man who will use everyone and everything to his own ends." (27)

In many ways, *Ratched* reminds us of a similar tyrannical doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), who in spite of being a medical practitioner lacks compassion and doesn't even have the patience to understand his patient's ailment. Right from the moment he meets Septimus, the deeply depressed and shocked World War I soldier, he is sure of the illness – 'lack of proportion' thus, trivialising Septimus's pain and trauma. He is loathed by Septimus and his ways though initially appreciated but later doubted by Septimus' wife Lukrezia too. Bradshaw is the scientist figure whose estimation is never doubted. The encounter between Septimus and Bradshaw exemplifies what Foucault talks about in his discourse on human reason. He says,

"Now the combat (between reason and unreason) was always decided beforehand, unreason's defeat inscribed in advance, in the concrete situation where madmen and the man of reason met" (2001: 239).

Bradshaw even without a proper dialogue with Septimus, is sure of his mental disease and the supposed cure. The reader can very well understand Septimus's instinctive dislike for the doctor. His rights are forfeited and he *must* follow the doctor's orders. Woolf, predating Foucault by more than sixty years expresses the same apprehensions about the doctor- patient relationship in the context of a medical illness

Power/Knowledge nexus and Patient-Caretaker Relationship

It is not a coincidence that both Woolf and Foucault, having themselves undergone medical treatments for depression express similar apprehensions about the figure of the doctor. Their images of an all powerful and alienating psychiatrist, might have emerged from the shared experience of being misunderstood by western medicine.

But what is even more startling in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is the fact that here, the nurse's power is upheld to such a great extent that she has the authority to keep some patients in involuntary confinement indefinitely- something which goes even beyond Foucauldian conception of psychiatric power. The mental asylum thus becomes a prison of sorts where patients are grossly misunderstood and ill-treated, all in the name of treatment and cure.

In the light of painful treatments such as electro convulsive therapy or lobotomy, one is forced to reconsider the strangeness of the way we treat the insane. This is precisely what Foucault does; he confronts us with the strange ways in which madness was supposed to be cured in the 18th century, when it was seen as an imbalance within the system of humours. Patients were given blood transfusions etc, thinking that it would bring the body fluids back into proportion. The Electric shock therapy and lobotomy too, being controversial methods even now can later on become the symbols of inhumanity of the present day psychiatry. In "One Flew.." this psychiatry is shown to be so misguided that it drives Billy, a nervous and depressed patient to death and Mc Murphy, the sane man is pushed into lifelong incapacity.

But here, comes the question of subjectivity-If psychiatry grants supreme authority to the medical practitioner, it depends upon him, how he uses such a power. In case of *Ratched* and *Bradshaw*, this authority is misdirected and misused.

When *Ratched* interrogates Billy, about his suicidal tendencies she conducts the "therapy" in such a manner that she further terrifies him. The idea of holding a one-to-one conversation to understand the patient might not be as faulty in itself but the way in which the therapy is executed becomes the very reason for the failure of therapy. Even Foucault holds the doctor figure as the key to psychoanalysis, but he simultaneously distrusts the credibility of the knowledge itself. He says,

"Psychoanalysis can unravel some of forms of madness; it remains a stranger to the sovereign enterprise of unreason. It can neither liberate nor transcribe, nor most certainly explain what is essential in this enterprise" (2001:264).

But if unreason could be explained and transcribed by reason, won't it become reason itself? Then, the unraveling of unreason, makes us accept the existence of deviance, which is the farthest we could go with respect to treating the unreasonable.

With this view in mind, let us look at a different form of deviance or mental illness- schizophrenia, as projected in film "A Beautiful Mind" (2001). The protagonist, John Nash, with paranoid schizophrenia is transferred into the world of his hallucinations and leads a very disturbed life. It is only after his diagnosis of schizophrenia and his acceptance of it, that he can come back to his "real" life. Here, the limitation of his medication is highlighted - it can be a peril to his intellectual capacity, sexual and emotional life. Since his medication cannot cure him without side effects, he chooses to live with the same mental condition. When he cannot

trust his own judgement and vision, he has to seek help. In a particular scene, he confirms with one of his students whether the stranger who seemed to be talking to him, was really present there or not. This is to say, that he might not have taken a scientific path to cure his illness, but he has no option but to seek the help of someone else's judgement. His illness is never cured, that is his hallucinatory visions keep disturbing him, but the realization that his visions were in fact hallucinatory, came through knowledge of a disorder called schizophrenia. It is the realisation that helps him come to terms with the people he lives with. All this is facilitated by nothing else but Psychiatry.

Jules D. Holzberg, in his introduction to the thesis-*Methods of madness- the mental hospital as the last resort*, contends with this issue of authenticity vis-à-vis psychiatry. He writes,

“To be maintained, a paradigm has to satisfy the canons of science, but there are always non scientific reasons of supporting it as well. Such factors may not be sufficient to induce support, but neither can they, nor should they be disregarded.”(Holzberg, 1969 :227)

Coming to the question of Power relationship between doctor and the patient- Foucault's arguments stand true even today. The doctor patient relationship is in fact a relationship of power, and most of psychological theories which talk about the doctor patient relationship, presuppose the subordinate position of the patient to that of the doctor. Moreover, if we bring in the concept of gender, power relationships become even more complicated. Although Foucault does not discuss the issue, but the inclusion of gender within this discourse supports Foucault's theory to a great extent.

Gender-Power-Knowledge and Mental illness

The gender- power nexus is exemplified in the Freudian analysis of hysteria. Freud, while attempting to 'cure' Dora's hysteria, appears to consider her point of view, but ultimately silences her. The gender divide amplifies the power of the male physician and the case study becomes coloured by male judgement of the female patient. In *One Flew...*, the power dynamics is the other way round. McMurphy addresses the head nurse as an emasculating “ball cutter” figure. Her authority combined with her physical appearance of having a stern look and big breasts is to symbolize an all dominating mother figure. Billy Babbit, the stuttering patient whose suicide triggers McMurphy's lobotomy is pathologically paranoid and afraid of his mother's dominance. (He is admitted to the asylum because he is suicidal, afraid of the opposite sex and his mother is friends with the head nurse).It is this dubious apparently maternal authority of the head nurse that repulses McMurphy. In a conversation with a fellow patient, who does not believe him he describes her as a “tough knife metal”

“Our dear Miss Ratched? Our sweet, smiling, tender angel of mercy, Mother Ratched, a ball-cutter? Why, friend, that's *most* unlikely.”

“Buddy, don't give me that tender little mother crap. She may be a mother, but she's big as a damn barn and tough as knife metal. She fooled me with that kindly little old mother bit for maybe three minutes when I came in this morning, but no longer. I don't think she's really fooled any of you guys for any six months or a year, neither. (60)

McMurphy's frank heretosexuality and rebellious attitude invigorates the general atmosphere amongst the Acutes which after a few comic showdowns finally results in Billy's suicide and McMurphy's lobotomy. Apart from the knowledge power nexus the role of gender thus plays a very significant part in this nexus. What is important is that these gender roles could work both ways.

Conclusion

Since the physician is a key figure in psychoanalysis or psychiatry, his position is not only that of power but of responsibility too. One cannot forget that ultimately the aim of medicine and psychiatry is the welfare of the patient, the power equations formed in the process play a part, but secondary. Therefore, although the role of power cannot be denied, but the way the power is used, depends on the physician. As we saw for characters like Ratched and Bradshaw, had they been more considerate and conducted their treatments in a different way, the stories would have been different.

Also, the power equation between the doctor and the patient plays a very significant role in the process of healing, but the aspect of subjectivity cannot be overlooked in any case.

To conclude, Foucault in his study highlights the intricate process by which the human meaning of madness has been understood and eventually obscured or suppressed by historical persons in different epochs. His analysis is very relevant when seen in the light of the knowledge-power nexus in relation to the understanding of mental illness. While one can say that Foucault undermines the value of psychiatric knowledge to some extent, because his focus is more on its political aspect, yet his observations when aligned with other sociological aspects and factors like gender, become even more relevant.

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