

A Foucauldian Study of Power Structures in *Fahrenheit 451*

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as a dystopia keeping in view the Foucauldian insights on power. The portrayal of reality as dystopia lays bare the interior mechanics of power which has the possibility of subversion as it is no more repressive; it rather uses softer tools. The paper attempts to make a Foucauldian study of the institutionalized power and 'other' power structures in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Key words: Dystopia, Power, Softer tools, Subversion

If they give you ruled paper, write the other way.

Juan Romon Jimenez

The above quote by Juan Ramon Jimenez acts as the epigraph for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and being true to its implied function sets the stage upright for the action to unfold. Writers, engaging with portrayal of reality as dystopia, lay bare interiority of power formation and functioning. All the dystopia novels can sufficiently be analysed in terms of the power structures forming its content, and subversive power structures. Foucault marks a moment of rupture from conventional epistemology of power. In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* through two differing prison scenes, Foucault reflects on the contemporary nature of power: power no more attempts to be unapologetically authoritative; it rather disciplines, governs and conquers through its softer tools. The Foucauldian analysis opens possibility of subversion; a space allowing subversion and toppling down of hegemony. And thus Foucault maintains power can be positive too; it also implies co-existence of forces of domination and forces of challenge. The relation between these

opposing forces is far more ambivalent than could be normally perceived. Inherently every power system contains germs of its undoing.

The dystopia, in *Fahrenheit 451*, is of complex nature. Ray Bradbury meditates on the farfetched consequence of mechanical life and censorship. He in the process weighs power structures and reflects on modus operandi of power. Ray Bradbury projects a society where books are cause of ‘sorrows’ and hence be burnt to ensure ‘happiness’. The idea behind book burning is to drain people of thinking ability. This paper attempts to make a Foucauldian study of the institutionalised power and ‘other’ power structures in *Fahrenheit 451*

Foucault mentions in his essay on ‘Truth and Power’:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as force that say no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses. (Foucault 119)

So power according to Foucault is not something that is always “repressive”; it is also ‘ideological’ as it uses softer tools to “induces pleasure”. Foucault does not want to use the term ideology because it “always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth”. Here Foucault wants to see “how the effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.”(118). *Fahrenheit 451* takes to extreme the act of censorship; we often hear of books, controversial, being banned or burned. It is an act of liberating the society of unnecessary trouble; books that may hurt sentiments of people, religious or otherwise, are banned or burnt. It is interesting to know, those who ban or burn books seldom read them. They depend on secondary sources to know the contents of the books that are victimised. One has the choice to read or not to read a certain book, yet condemnation of a book (reading or without reading it) gives a sort of perverse pleasure. In the novel, the firemen derive pleasure by burning books. For Montag, it was pleasure to burn books and when he views himself in the mirror after a night of burning books, he grins, ‘the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame’. Despair, agony and ennui are prevalent in the society but never are allowed to surface, and it benefits the state to burn all the objects that remind people of it. Firemen are moral-police, a functionary body which safeguards so-assumed ‘happiness’. Books trigger thoughts, broaden perspective, provide insights; in every possible way books provoke intellect to function, and save humans from turning mechanical. The book, in such dystopian setting, are perilous for the state; in order to curtail free-thinking state removes books, declares possession of books a crime and punishes the transgressors.

Leisure time is what one requires to ponder, to go wayward, to brood and examine. Time stands testimony that no thinker could be possible without wondering. ‘I wonder...’ had been a recurrent prologue to visionary thoughts. Without much adieu, state removes, in an organised way, all the arrangements that could instigate one to wonder. There are no reclining chairs to sit and let thoughts loosen, no porches to sit and tit-a-tat with oneself, no magazines or newspapers, in the real sense of the words; it is to eliminate the apparatuses that titillate thinking. “No one has time for anyone else” (Ray 21). TV plays an influential role in people’s life, around the clock state filters programmes into their heads, stuff that is incapable to instigate thinking. ‘Parlors’ have substituted books, symposiums, and intellectual discourses. People exchange words but don’t talk: “People don’t talk about anything” (Ray 28). They

have nothing to talk for they have no thoughts. Even in the cafes, joke boxes are installed to disallow minds to wonder. They repeatedly listen to the jokes and feign happiness. In the novel, Beatty hints at education that is imparted in these words, “Cram them(students) full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of ‘facts’ they feel stuffed, but absolutely ‘brilliant’ with information. Then they’ll feel they are thinking, they will get the *sense* of motion without moving” (Ray 58). Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth and others are taken off the shelves, in fact no literature is taught, universities running liberal arts courses are shut. Intellectuals, artists, authors, and teachers are thrown out of job. Whatever has to do with ‘social thinking’ is cleverly amputated from the society. In the name of education ‘hard facts’ are stuffed in their (children) brains. ‘Catch them young’, to avoid queer cases like Clarissa, their (children) training starts at tender age. Beatty tells, “Now we are almost snatching them from cradle”.

A book let’s mind wonder, in fact, books are in themselves meanderings of authors’ minds. In order to reinforce “don’t wonder” books had to be burned, and the act was justified by terming it as an act to ‘let people be happy’. And thus firemen are not merely ‘firemen’ but ‘the happiness boys’.

Something is amiss in this world; a deep sense of alienation has set within all. Books are quite visibly missing from the society, but it is not merely books. People have become incapable of feeling any true emotion, the institution of family is distorted beyond recognition, and marriage is another make-shift-arrangement devoid of love. People fear silence, anything that makes them face themselves, to grapple with the question: am I really happy, is abhorred. Millie tried suicide, but failed and the next morning on being asked about it, shook her shoulders. She didn’t know what she tried to do, or perhaps she didn’t want to encounter her wildness. Such cases are mundane, every night almost ten-nine happen in each city. “She never would meet the other Millie who lives many layers underneath”. Individuals do not recognise themselves; they do not want to encounter themselves. More than book burning, state is interested in dissolving individuality, and converting humans into resources: subjects of the state. No place is left for human passions; Montag on being asked whether he ever loved loses track of his camouflage life.

Relations merely serve as catalogues of convenience. Mrs Bowles talks about her children apathetically, her husband is away in war and she is not even an inch stirred about it. Later we read Millie rings the alarm and calls up firemen to burn her own house. Millie can’t be held responsible, she was programmed to do so, and it was impressed deep on her mind to maintain fidelity towards the law. Human relations are on the verge of death rather civilisation is breathing its last. It is a crumbling world.

Montag, in the novel, is depicted initially as an unthinking fireman who like all other derives pleasure from burning books. The state manufactures uncritical beings and deploys influential subjects to monitor the uncritical beings who once in a while turn ‘queer’. The queer subjects, left out by school apparatus, are systematically erased; rather such subjects are eliminated at each step up the hierarchy. Captain Beatty acts as a disciplining force that restores wayward gone firemen to ‘normalcy’. Such disciplining elements exist in all the sub setups of the state. In conversations of Beatty and Montag one gauges the internal dynamics of power where, paradoxically enough, the rebellion is crushed by using the means that state affects to censor. Captain Beatty manifests profound knowledge of books that he works to condemn; he uses quotations from varied books and authors to establish the futility of books.

The dialogues seem analogous to Platonic meandering which seeks to assert pre-conceived, biased ideas. Captain Beatty could see through the feigned illness of Montag and warns him about 'intellectual curiosity'. Beatty says, every fireman once in a while goes through the phase of intellectual curiosity and steals books. The state censors books, book reading, book keeping and thinking, in short, all that could possibly invalidate state backed facts. But, one logically arrives at the questions: in such an utter totalitarian state, when even thoughts are manufactured, how can books exist in abundance, or how are the books allowed to be published? Couldn't flow of books be controlled? The conjecture that books exist from, what appears to be, long extinct culture of books and free flow of ideas breaks under its own weight; the rapid pace of book burning leaves little hope for survival of books even from previous regime of book lovers. The authoritative state leaves space for dissent to breed, grow and challenge the power. Whether the subversive power topples down the hegemonic hierarchies or, in last lag, is assimilated in its vortex remains beyond the mapping of the novel. However, possibility of a periphery producing books, 'queer' subjects and dissent appears prominent. And the growing incidents of book stealing allude to the existence of subversive power within the system. Character of Beatty emerges as a sterilising unit for subjects caught in-between.

Clarisse, the humane sensibility, working with an urgency to unfold the totalitarian schemes of the state, provokes Montag to question the white lies propagated and circulated by the state. In Montag's own words: she looked straight at me as if I mattered. State plays down the destabilising version; the idea of happiness promoted by the state disallows exchange of thoughts, breaks down inter and intra human communication, and anti-establishment activities. Clarisse, in the wake of state sponsored-cum-controlled upbringing, emerges as an alternate view of 'happiness'. The romantic fancy : 'man in the moon', 'touching dew drops', 'pristine sun rise and sun set' is in sharp tension with the mechanical sensitivity of the subjects; her fanciful ideas instigate Montag to analyse his state-given beliefs. State assumes threats from such romantic ideologues and eliminates them. State's role is evident in the supposed accident involving the death of Clarissa. But, the novel gives no detail of the accident. The event that prompted rebel in Montag doesn't even find a dilute description. One has all the right to doubt the version of the events mentioned to Montag by Millie, who in turn is no direct witness to the event. The missing subjects, perhaps, are thrown at the peripheries; a zone outside the state controlled system exists that can attain power to overthrow the system. They continue to exist, but their existence fails to disrupt the functioning of hegemonic structures.

Faber, a professor who lost his job when last liberal arts college was shut, works as a catalyst to agitation against the system. And paradoxically, he even maintains the level of rebellion in queer-turned subjects so as to curb the possibility of chain reaction and further solidarity. Faber, on being asked for advice on sensitising other firemen, expresses clear disinterest in the proposed plan. The role of Faber appears to be dubious given his self proclaimed 'cowardice'. He avoids direct involvement in the action plan of Montag; and when Montag is caught by the Firemen directs him through a safe passage to Outcasts. Faber, thus, is instrumental in finally eliminating Montag, a queer-turned-being, to the safer periphery of the Outcasts.

Many SF present a gloomy side of the scientific and technological advancement, civilisation reaches at its zenith to crumble under its own weight. Decadence seems inevitable. Asimov in Foundation constructs a civilisation which reaches at the max of

technological advancement and then falls back. Ray Bradbury, through the issue of censorship and book burning, crafts a world in which books are reduced to daily soaps, on TV all of Hamlet and Macbeth boils down to ten minute of entertainment; parts which may let one wonder are bowdlerised. Need of more sensory entertainment devoid of sensibility, capsules of Shakespeare, and two-minute Maggie are eating into the society. And the stress that state exercises on its subject is allowed to ease in zone of fancy, periphery or in the company of Outcasts. The Foucauldian analysis of power structures of the dystopia represented in *Fahrenheit 451* exposes the sterilising mechanism of the power. It can't, though, be denied that the alternate power structures which draw their fuel from the dominant structures possess latency to change the hierarchy. Towards the closure of the novel reader finds the palpable existence of periphery in a group of outcasts. These outcasts are the queer subjects and queer-turned subjects that lie outside the state controlled system, or rather visible system of domination. Ray Bradbury, in classical marxist fashion, draws the novel to a positive end. The power and number of outcasts are on rise. The possibility of outrage is high and damnation of the system is in the offing.

Milie is referred as 'doll that melts its own heat' for she fears to encounter her thoughts as she won't be able to stand the fire of her own thoughts and would melt; she would be driven to madness once she starts thinking. The title: Doll melts of its own heat it can be extended to reflect on the fate of the dystopia presented in the novel. In the last lag, the power structures would annihilate their own ends giving way to new power structures. However, what ultimately would bring an end to the present power structures remains questionable. The alternate structures, the periphery or the Outcasts are created by the dominant structures and they operate with, if not within, the system. In an interesting reversal, Montag draws immense pleasure from burning the inner walls of his house which were TV screens propagating state agenda. Bradbury throws a hint at the reversal of the flow of energy from periphery to centre; the hierarchies would change.

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