

Power, Space and Resistance: Foucauldian Reading of *The Pickup*

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Abstract

The present article is an attempt to read Nadin Gordimer's *The Pickup* from the lens of Foucault. It starts with Foucault's assumption that power is everything and any kind of relation in the world is defined through the discourses of power. It discusses the techniques through which the power dominates its authority over the subjects and, in this case, speaks of the spatial distribution of the individuals in the special spaces as a technique to promote the operation of the power. In this position, the individual who is limited to a special space has been expected to submit the spatial discourses however there has been always some opportunities for resistance as Foucault mentions "where there is power, there is resistance". Going along such an idea, this article now seeks to find the main agent in process of labeling a subject as the resistant character; it aims to prove that it is space which defines the boundaries of either subjugation or resistance of an individual rather than power that has been considered as the only dominant presence.

Keywords: Foucault, Power, Space, Spatial Distribution, Spatial Discourse, Resistance

1. Introduction

For more than several decades, the exploration of the power structure has been the core concern of the power scholars including Foucault who deeply focuses on the concept of the power and seeks to discover the techniques through which the discourses of power are fully perceived and conceived by the subjected individuals in the society. Foucault's understanding of the notion of the power differs from others in the past or even his contemporaries since he questions the operation of the power rather than its origin; that is, in spite of other philosophers who ask questions concerning "What is power?" and "Where does it come from?", Foucault concerns how the power is exercised in the different parts of the society and how it imposes its authority over the individuals since it denies any violence in the social system. Regarding the operation of the power, Foucault speaks of a set of spatial discourses limited to a specific space and being useful in promoting the domination of the power; that is, any individual who is in the realm of such a space has seemed to be indirectly submitted to the power through its spatial discourses; otherwise, he is verbally out of space and would be defined as a resistant subject, a character who is intended to stand against the spatial norms and will not adopt himself to the space. In this way, the article aims to represent the triple relation of power, space and resistance in an exemplary fictional work, *The Pickup* (2002), written by Nadine Gordimer.

1.2 Foucauldian Power

In his *History of Sexuality I*, Foucault firstly affirms that power is not something which can be held by one superior agent; it is not imposed from top to down rather "it is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (94). In this regard, the notion of power is defined through the different relations (i.e. knowledge relations, sexual relations, economic relations ...) all of which modify the actions of one another. With keeping in the mind this relational concept of power, it is worth noting that Foucault believes in a set of assumptions based on which the actions and behaviors are modified or reformed, he speaks of a discourse collection through which the normal and abnormal come to be created. By discourse, Foucault possibly means any presuppositions that determine our way of thinking and doing in specific time, a set of assumptions "in any given historical period [that enable us] to write, speak or think about a given social object or practice only in certain specific ways and not others" (McHoul and Grace 31).

In 1975, writing *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault subtly reveals that discourses are never neutral vehicles of ethic assumptions but are surely embedded with the cultural and political objectives; in fact, it is the cultural and political benefits which determine the framework of the discourses and thereby define and form our ways of thinking and behaving. Such a political role of the discourses, Foucault believes, should be aided by some tools or major techniques in order to promote the operation of the discourse and forward its effects in the process of subject formation. As one of the primary techniques, Foucault speaks of the spatial distribution of the individuals in a special space which is not

necessarily a prison since the direct force or violence represents merely frustrated in the modern forms of the power. This French thinker then continues that the so-called spaces are the confined places (i.e. monasteries, armies, military barracks, secondary schools...) in where all subjects are assembled under the same roof; in such an occasion, the subjects are possibly represented by a set of certain discourses defined by the power as the normal behaviors or actions and are unconsciously imposed to normalize themselves based on the unified standards. In this regard, the subjects form their behaviors and actions in the light of the dominant power spread its authority in a spatial distribution.

2. The Significance of Space

Regarding what has been mentioned, space can be taken as an instrument in the process of subject formation as it protects the orders and discourses of the power and it also masters the spirit of subjugation among the confined individuals since it reminds the subjects their social position and trains them not to violate the defined norms. In other words, power imposes its authority over the individuals by and through the defined spaces in where the subjects are organized in a particular way (i.e. same age, same sex...). Supposing a simple example of the secondary school would clarify the importance of the space in the process of power domination: the first point that should be considered is that this space (school) is constructed by the dominant power and it is used in the shadow of the power discourses. The next point is the role of the school agents in achieving the power's goal which is subjugating the learning and discipline rules by the students; in this case, the agents (i.e. manager, teacher ...) encourage the subjects not to break the laws and indirectly observe their actions in the way of success. These agents provide a set of rules (i.e. uniforms) and then address the subjects to submit the orders as far as they are stayed in the school and therefore they come to train their actions in the light of this particular spatial distribution and its discourses.

In line with the Foucault's theory of spatial distribution, the argument is the validity of defined spatial discourses for anyone who has just come to this space not necessarily for activities related to the school discourses; there are in fact other subjects, ranging from those clean the rooms and make the tea to those who paint the walls and repair the classes, who may clash with the dominant discourses of the space; in this respect, the students and the others (who come from out of school) stand near to each other, yet socially distant, as each part has its own definition of the space and therefore cannot follow the same rules. In a broader sense, the space of a society would deal with the subjects who may possibly oppose the dominant social discourses of the space, some social members whose actions and movements are not in harmony with the spatial norms, a type of people who, in Foucault's term, are defined and labeled as the rebels or the resistant members of the society. In this respect, the notion of resistant comes to be created by the space whose discourses do not accord with the needs and beliefs of some special individuals.

To make the argument more clear, the rest of the article would focus on Gordimer's 2002 novel, *The Pickup*, in which the spatial discourses of the place are not to be hold by a black character, Abdu, and his white wife. Abdu has been grown up in a religious family in a non-privileged, poor African country where the religious discourses seem to dominate the population's lifestyles and, to some extent, restrict the individuals not to obtain new experiences especially for female subjects. To be free from such a religious restrictions, Abdu migrates to a non-religious country in where he meets July, a white wealthy girl who then marries him.

2.1 Resistance in *The Pickup*

After some years of residence in a liberal country, Abdu is forced (because of some political problems) to return to his birthplace in accompany of his white wife who has never experienced the religious limitations in his own country. On this point, the ways that Abdu and July counter the social and religious discourses of the present space come to be negotiated under the light of Foucault's theory which believes in the spatial discourses as a major technique to obtain the maximum subjugation of the subjects.

Once they arrive to the Arab poor country, Abdu clearly shows his reluctance to accept the religious oppression of his family or any divine decrees established for governing the lives of the individuals; he fully knows the spatial discourses of his village on the matter of praying times, fasting in Ramadan month or the taboo existed between girls and boys, a religious law that forbids any love relation before the marriage but he refuses to follow what the present space has aimed to impose on him. Abdu seems to totally break the spatial norms and even seeks to associate a group of young men who are gathered together to create "a moral religious revolution" (Gordimer 177), they believe that "we cannot go on accepting what our grandfathers do, what life is that- the traditional interpretations of Islam...we must cross-fertilize Islam with the world if the ideals of Islam are to survive, the old model does not fit" (Gordimer 177). In the company of these brothers, Abdu feels a kind of survival against the spatial principles which are mostly religious in his country.

The story of the amazing resistive actions of this young black man "who had taken himself off to foreign countries" (Gordimer 188) and now has come to his own birthplace while he has no more belief in the religious discourses of the space "comes as a shock to his dear parents...this comes out of sorrow...as a tragedy" (Gordimer 189-90) for those people in the village who fully perceived and conceived the spatial religious discourses of their country, they considered such an attitude as the resistant against the government, society or, in one word, the power authority.

July has also represented an aspect of resistance against the spatial norms of this country, although she is informed "it is not proper [for women] to go about to the market or shops unless accompanied by one of the sisters or at least a couple of children" (Gordimer 171), she goes out alone when the brothers are at work, the children are in school and the women are cooking and it defines her as the resistant in the eyes of the female villagers who are used to be a domestic worker.

3. Concluding Remarks

The main point to be drawn from the outlined reading of this article is the triple relation of power, space and resistance. It has been mentioned that the power dominates its authority in any particular society in where the individuals are submitted to a certain set of discourses varied from space to space. It has been mentioned that each space has its own spatial discourses through which it is able to locate the individuals, train and conduct them in the broad field of possibilities, judge them and eventually calculate their qualities or merits.

As a result of such a calculation, some people come to be defined as the subjects not intended to follow the accepted norms, as “a type of malcontents who blame everything in their lives on others-on the authorities, on the government...they want to bring down the government” (Gordimer189), and eventually qualified as the resistant subjects who oppose the common spatial discourses of the place.

Here, it can be concluded that what labels an individual as the resistant is not the power or the authority rather that is the space which limits the subjects to a set of predefined discourses and indirectly forces them to follow the norms even if they are assigned in the old century. The point is that the power constructs some special spaces for the well operation of its domination, then these spaces with their own series of rituals, customs and norms clarify what may and what may not take place within this particular space and now such a space seeks to train the members practicing the existing norms and submitting the rules. Since the space may not be fully successful in the process of subjugation, there will appear some individuals whose actions and beliefs do not accord with the dominant spatial norms; that is, they live inside the present space but cannot adopt its rituals and norms. In this way, the space – as like as Abdu’s family- will verbally exclude them from the present space and label them as the resistant subjects who stand against the domination of the space. Now, the notion of resistance seems to be created by the space which expects the members totally perceive and conceive the discourses. In this regard, the trilogy of power, space and resistance come to be understood as the authority of the power leads to the creation of the space and the domination of the space determines the boundaries of either subjugation or resistance.

In the end, it can also be argued that any resistant subject is able to appropriate the space for himself and become a fully subjugated individual. On this view, he should turn the space to his own needs and beliefs, either by subverting the spatial discourse or by moving to a space where its norms are agreed to his beliefs just like Abdu who prefers to hang off the traditional religious laws and “give up an opportunity that would bring advancement, comforts...and eventually a high place” (Gordimer 190) for him.

4. Originality/Contribution

This article contributes to the existing researches in Literature, philosophy, and politics. Its purpose is to unlock a literary text with the help of Foucault’s theories of power.

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