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# Applying Michel Foucault's power theory in Shakespeare's King Lear

**Prof. Dr. Ansam R. AbdullaAlmaarof**

Corresponding author email: [Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq](mailto:Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq)

**Layla Nazhan Hamid**

Tikrit University-College of Education for Women- Department of English  
Iraq- SalahAldeen-Tikrit

**Ethar Riyadh Abdullah**

Dyala University-College of Basic Education - Department of English

**Abstract**---Michel Foucault is a French postmodernist philosopher whose theories have impacted different fields of knowledge in the modern era. Foucault is one of the few writers who recognize the nature of power in social relations. Foucault views power as a dynamic relationship between discourses and subjects, produced by discourses dominating specific subjects or governing individuals' demands. Thus, the present paper aims at discovering the power relations in Shakespeare's King Lear in the light of Foucault's theory of power. Like Shakespeare, Foucault is interested in language as a human problem, and hence his dramas can be read as the study of the nature of language. In King Lear, the character's actions and reactions are apparent in words and sentences to reflect the powerful and powerless position. Considered in this way, King Lear seems to dramatize the words and sentences as a total discourse of power relations.

**Keywords**--- Shakespeare, King Lear, Postmodernism, Power Theory.

## Introduction

### Foucault's Theory of Power

Michel Foucault is a French postmodernist philosopher whose theories have impacted different fields of knowledge in the modern era. Foucault is one of the few writers who recognize the nature of power in social relations. Foucault views power as a dynamic relationship between discourses and subjects, produced by discourses dominating specific subjects or governing individuals' demands. Thus,

the present paper aims at discovering the power relations in Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the light of Foucault's theory of power. Like Shakespeare, Foucault is interested in language as a human problem, and hence his dramas can be read as the study of the nature of language. In *King Lear*, the character's actions and reactions are apparent in words and sentences to reflect the powerful and powerless position. Considered in this way, *King Lear* seems to dramatize the words and sentences as a total discourse of power relations.

Michel Foucault is a French postmodernist philosopher who has hugely influenced the understanding of many concepts such as discourse, power, and knowledge in everyday life. As Foucault defined discourse, it refers to the processes of knowledge formation and the social practices, subjectivities, and power relations that are inherent in such knowledge and their interconnections. Foucault's discourse analysis is concerned with the power dynamics in society as manifested via language and practices. In this sense, discourses are more than modes of thought and meaning production, but the total behaves reflected on or by language. They determine the nature of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional attitudes of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 108).

Foucault is among a few philosophers who realize that power can be a necessary, creative, and constructive force in society rather than a negative, coercive, or repressive force that compels us to act against our will. (Gaventa 3). However, Foucault disputes that power is held by individuals or organizations through episodic or sovereign acts of dominance or coercion, arguing that power is distributed and ubiquitous rather than episodic or sovereign. For him, "power is everywhere and comes from everywhere", so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. Instead, it is a kind of "meta power" or "regime of truth" that pervades society and which is in constant flux and negotiation (Foucault 63).

Foucault claims that the study of power and power's functions has been suppressed or simplified throughout history due to many factors. He outlines three different approaches to understanding power. Two of them are old and antiquated, namely the state or sovereign's role and the agent's role in the economically dominating sector of society. Thus, to comprehend how power operates in contemporary cultures, Foucault proposes an alternative one, which he calls "a disciplinary power". It was apparent in the governmental systems and social services developed in eighteenth-century Europe, such as prisons, schools, and mental hospitals. Their surveillance and assessment systems ceased to require force or violence as people learnt to self-discipline and act in predictable ways (Foucault 155).

Furthermore, Rather than focusing just on the oppression of the powerless, Foucault investigates how power operates in the everyday interactions between individuals and institutions. "power is exercised from innumerable points", which cannot be obtained, seized, or acquired. In this sense, power operates and behaves more like a technique than a means of control. Additionally, he sees power ties extend to include economic, cognitive, and sexual interactions intertwined with one another. In this regard, Foucault extends that genuine power relations do not put domination over individuals, but it can be as "a mobile network of struggle less a matter of domination than of circulation" (Bernauer 54).

Instead, a proper power relation “occurs in a field of struggle where various parties attempt to give structure to the action of others and the others, in turn, may comply, resist and attempt to give structure to the same terrain of action”. Power rises from the bottom to the top, implying that the thorough double struggle between the powerful and powerless does not begin at the top and gradually narrows until it reaches the social body's depths (Shiner 391).

Foucault refused to consider power as a monolithic property. Dismissing this notion, Foucault asserts that power is fluid rather than static. It is a perpetual process that includes both positive and negative phases, which “must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application ” (Foucault 98). Here, Foucault donates to what Foucault calls “relations of power”. The relations determine how individuals can negotiate power in their relationships. External forces do not give individuals power; instead, power is given to them as they interact. It seeps into everything people do and every interaction they have with others (Rabinow 22).

## **Method**

It is clear that the selected and most suitable theory to analyse Shakespeare's King Lear is Power Theory of Foucault. It claims that power-knowledge –language tringle is a relationship that rules the world around. The researchers try to analyse the text of the play to show this relation and its application.

## **Discussion**

### **The Concept of Power in Shakespeare's King Lear**

Foucault is interested in how specific discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have attained the status and currency of truth, thereby dominating how one defines and organizes himself and the social world. In contrast, other alternative discourses are marginalized and subjugated. In this section, Shakespeare's King Lear will interpret according to Foucault's view of power as a dynamic relationship between discourses and subjects, produced by discourses that dominate specific subjects.

In the late Elizabethan age, Shakespeare's English chronicle history plays were part of an effort to portray national history attractively. When it comes to considerations about power relations, they are generally concerned with issues of rule or misrule, conflict or power struggles. In different cases, i.e. a family, a society, among a monarchy's various factions, during a civil war, or between separate states or rival kingdoms, power struggles could occur. Therefore, Shakespeare's plays depict a complex web of power dynamics involving multiple spheres of influence. According to their place in this social network, each character or group of characters has access to various forms of power. (Hadfield 12).

According to Walzer, in *King Lear*, the inquiry of power is crucial from the opening scene of division to the final catastrophic scene of the play. *King Lear*, which Foucault calls "a story of *parresia*, a test of frankness," is primarily a land distribution to Lear's daughters and, more importantly, their spouses. Because they are married to the King's eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall are already powerful men in the north and south-west of the British Isles. Cordelia will marry one of two men: the Duke of Burgundy or the King of France. As a result, this is a ceremonial power transfer(13).

King Lear used power to verify family affection. Although it sounds ridiculous, it can be from behind that real power works through words, and this power has real effects. As a monarch with absolute power, he unconsciously produced a set of discourse systems. The closer the three daughters' expressions are to this discourse system, the more King Lear's favour will be, which runs counter to this system. Accepting punishment, the third daughter challenged the patriarchy and the royal power, but at the same time, the words can also counteract the power. The eldest daughter and the second daughter gained the trust of King Lear through rhetoric and then divided the power of the monarch. The standard of division depends on which daughter can better express her love for the father. The eldest daughter Goneril and the second daughter Ruigan spared no effort to express their "heart-felt words" to their father, and King Lear satisfied them with a large land area. However, the youngest daughter, Cordelia, could not say it and told many big truths that "I love you in my heart". King Lear could not bear this kind of truth. He, therefore, lost his mind in front of power and rejected the truth in front of vanity (Paul 433)

Bălan maintains that power resembles something that operates and functions in a predetermined method. It is a strategy rather than ownership, and Foucault, like Shakespeare, views it as congruent with resistance, as an inventive or creative component. To Shakespeare, who understands the essence of authority and power, Lear's attempt to create a gift by splitting his kingdom between his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, is an extreme and undeniable mistake of sovereignty. His rash decision reduced him to the status of an average man. According to Foucault's philosophy, this is a tangible demonstration of authority abuse. According to this argument, King Lear does not act following his association with the country's needs; instead, he acts tyrannically in dividing the kingdom between his daughters (55-61).

In the same vein, as Aldama observes, the play shows how Lear is pushed to the point when he realizes that he must give up the power he craves to get it back. As the play demonstrates, the primary error of his sovereignty is that he never respects the essence of the relationship between authority and power. Bing losing his power means losing authority. Such matter had passed in the King's mind (213). Lear's trial to decrease his authority over his kingdom reflects his psychological breakdown and a reference to what turns out to be the result of sovereignty when he lacks power.

Aldama further observes that Lear also "lost his supremacy to evaluate languages and articulate or phonate sentences. The cruelty he has exposed has opened his eyes to the reality he never suspected as king" (213 ). A measure of Lear's tragic

pain is his discovery of the distance between sound and sense may appear in this quotation:

"They flattered me like a dog and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything I said 'ay,' and 'no' too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind made me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, I found I smelt them out! They are not men o' their words; they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" (p.101).

Speaking about power throughout the play, King Lear depicts his suffering at the hands of his two daughters, Goneril and Regan. His two daughters no longer look for him. Prior to assuming power, Lear's daughter calls him "Sir", "your majesty", and "your dear highness", implying that he is exercising his authority as a father as well as a king. Using synthetic language to exploit Lear's susceptibility indicates Goneril and Regan's thirst for further power and control. According to Foucault's view, these two daughters are power-hungry and callous in their behaviour. Their desire for power stimulates them. Additionally, they abuse authority for their advantage by using it against others, which distinguishes them from their sister, Cordelia, whom the King considered an unloving daughter during his test to determine who loves him the most and should inherit his throne(Freeman7).

Similarly, Hazel (52) holds that King Lear is "above all, a play about power, property, and inheritance", and in maintaining the power and property relations, words play the prime role in this play. The sense of power begins as Lear calls his court together to formally divide his kingdom between his three daughters: "Give me the map there Know that we have divided In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent To shake all cares and business from our age Conferring them on younger strengths, while we Unburdened crawl toward death" (p.6). By the words, he also disinherits Cordelia and gives his property and power to Goneril and Regan with the words: "I do invest you jointly, with my power /Pre-eminence, and all the large effects/That troop with majesty" ( p.124).

On the other hand, the new ruling class demolishes the entire structure of the previous ruling class to tighten its grip on power. It is safe to suppose that Goneril and Regan are well aware that their father's retinue of a hundred knights and soldiers is not a display of military prowess but rather an expression of the feudal system's pride. Once they felt he lost his power, they changed their discourse to more cruel and disrespectful. As he loses his power over his kingdom, Goneril initiates her domestic Oswald to display absolute disrespect for Lear:

"KING LEAR: .... O, You Sir, You Come hither, Sir. Who am I, Sir OSWALD: My lady's father. KING LEAR: My lady's father.! My lady, You slave! You Cur! OSWALD: I am none of these, my Lord, I beseech your pardon." knave Your whoreson dog!" (P.68)

Malinowski observes that a sentence is meaningful only when seen in the context in which it is used because language is "a mode of action, not a countersign of thought" (12). As long as Lear is in a powerful position, his words can rule others. His rages are futile when he is no longer in authority. His downfall can also be in

the allusion made by Gloucester's consolation: "My dear lord,/ You know the fiery quality of the duke/ How unmovable and fixed he is/ In his course" (p.84 ). When the crazy King asks the elements to destroy the wicked world during the storm, they do not respond to his words. This event taught him about the perils of flattery and the emptiness of language isolated from power. (McDonald 46). Lear's words have no effect, but Goneril's words have. Here, Lear reflects his loss of power when he states that "Nothing will come of nothing" (p.85) and "What, fifty of my followers at clap?/Within a fortnight?" (p.248).

Along with this, King Lear reads another facet of discourse in which, even if the speaker lacks authority, language can assist in gaining power, as Diamond and Quinby mention, "a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance" (185). In this sense, a speaker must establish a context for his or her language. Edmund constructs a setting for acquiring power and then utilizes words to deceive Gloucester within that environment. He wields a counterfeit letter, which he intends to use to depose Edgar and seize his position. He is aware that a counter-discourse may develop to counter his words. So, Edmund does not give Edgar any chance to speak to his father, and when a reader examines his turbulent sentence structure of Edmund, a reader can see that Edgar is swamped by questions, statements, warnings, and commands. He manages only one sentence; "I am sure it, not a word" (p.28). He is bewildered by Edmund's account of Gloucester's wrath. Such exchange reveals the impact of rhetoric in gaining or losing power.

## **Conclusion**

Foucault, like Shakespeare, understands that power is coincident with an industrious and creative aspect. In *King Lear*, the question of power is vital from the opening scene of division to the catastrophic scene of the end of the play. It is a network of power actions and interactions at many levels of society in which various forms of power interact. According to their place within this social network, each character or group of characters in the play has access to varying degrees of power. In this sense, power is almost like something that performs and functions in a definite manner. It is a plan rather than ownership. It determines the position the person has and how much can he/she do.

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According to the authors, there are no conflicting interests that need to be declared.

### Data availability statement

Upon reasonable request, the dataset used in this work may be obtained from the person who served as the corresponding author.

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