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**MICHEL FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF POWER/KNOWLEDGE  
DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**



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**ABSTRACT :** Foucault has become a distinguished figure the analysts and researchers interested in making sense of the complexity of modern forms of social existence. There is a great need to pay careful attention towards the major themes and subjects of his works so that its significance, scope, range, and development can be examined and analysed in a justifiable manner. . Foucault argues for the implications of power with knowledge so that all of the knowledge we have is the result or the effect of power struggles. There is no society without power and therefore no one can live outside the relations of power. Foucault has transformed and almost brought a revolution in the sphere of English studies by writing on the subjects of power, knowledge, discourse, giving it a distinct shape that when a contemporary trend in language and literature is to be established, one has to depend on Foucault.

**KEYWORDS :** Power, Knowledge, Discourse, Resistance, Dominance

## RESEARCH PAPER

In this research paper, I have tried to present an overview of Michel Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. Foucault has become a major figure the analysts and researchers interested in making sense of the complexity of modern forms of social existence. He was born in Poitiers, France where his father was a famous doctor and wanted his son to adopt the same profession. His reputation as a voracious reader and scholar helped him to achieve the prestigious chair as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Clermont-Ferrand. In 1959 Foucault completed his doctorate under the supervision of great thinker and philosopher George Cunningham.

There is a great need to pay careful attention towards the major themes and subjects of his works so that its significance, scope, range, and development can be examined and analysed in a justifiable manner. Foucault's works can be interpreted in a number of ways like the works of other prominent writers. Problems of interpretation do not arise only in relation to the particular texts, but also in respect of the development of Foucault's work. For example, there are some differences of interest, formulation, and method to be found among the various works devoted to literature, madness, medicine, the human sciences, punishment, and sexuality. Recognition of such differences frequently inspired Foucault to reinvestigate his earlier works in order to reconcile them with his later developments and viewpoints. However, elements of self-criticism are also to be found in Foucault's work, notably in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* where criticisms are presented of earlier studies, and then again in the works on sexuality where the analyses of madness and the asylum, and punishment and the prison have been described as perhaps insisting too much on techniques of the self. Nevertheless, as will become clear, there are important continuities in Foucault's work, notably historical analyses of the various modes through which in western culture human beings have been constituted as subjects and objects of knowledge and an associated concern with the inter-relationships between forms of knowledge and power.

Power is a key element in discussion of discourse and Foucault investigates the question of power and provides a new analysis. Rather than simply assuming that power is a possession or that power is the violation of someone's rights, or as the Marxist theorists have assumed that power relations are determined by economic relations, Foucault affirms that power is no more an object which can be possessed by someone or some groups. Foucault argues for the implications

of power with knowledge so that all of the knowledge we have is the result or the effect of power struggles. There is no society without power and therefore no one can live outside the relations of power. Foucault examines the relation of individual and society thinking that individual is not powerless against groups or social institutions. He does not reduce the constraints imposed to individuals, but links that power is not limited to a particular sphere, but is scattered throughout the society. In this way one can observe the way in which each human interaction how resistance produces. Power is often seen as an unstable element, which can be always challenged and as a result, power relations must be permanently maintained and acknowledged.

The issues of power and knowledge have occupied a central position within sociological analysis and debates. From the works of Weber, the exercise of power and domination has been conceptualized within sociology as a constitutive feature of social life. There is an underlying thematic unity or continuity in Foucault's work which may be described as the analysis of particular modes of objectification, of the forms of knowledge and relations of power through which human beings have been constituted as subjects. In 1970, Foucault delivered his inaugural lecture 'The Order of Discourse' in which he outlined a series of ideas on discourse and power and set a provisional agenda for a related series of studies on the forms of control by which in every society the production of discourse is governed, namely 'prohibited words'. Although references to power within this text are relatively limited, it is clear that the issue of the powers associated with or attached to discourse has been placed on the research agenda. With the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, the theme of power became an established component in Foucault's work, as Lois McNay remarks:

Foucault's interest was not directed at the expression of power in its most central and institutionalized forms such as class relations rather, he was concerned to examine how power relations of inequality and oppression are created and maintained in more subtle and diffuse ways through ostensibly humane and freely adopted social practices.

(McNay 2)

The foremost questions about power indicated by Foucault are how power is exercised and by what medium or technique. He is also concerned with the effects of the exercise of power rather from where it comes from and what its nature is. In a nutshell, power is not comprehended as a personal property or possession of a ruling/domineering class, institution or state. Power should be considered as a strategy having certain tactics and techniques. The effects of dominance or

suppression related with the power arise not from the implementation by a subject but due to the use of certain procedures and methods. It is something very essential to understand that the exercise of power does not enforce or impose any kind of constraint or prohibition upon the powerless and subalterns. Summarily, Foucault visualized power neither as an institution nor as a structure but defines and elaborates power as a multiplicity of force relations which are intentional as well as objective. He further mentions the significant aspect of power regarding its co-existence with resistance as Foucault contends, "where there is power, there is resistance, that power depends for its existence on the presence of a multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 92-93).

Generally, power is appreciated and regarded as the capacity of an agent to impose his wish over the will of the defenseless, or the ability to force them to do things which they do not want to do. In this way, power is considered as possession, as something retained or held by those people who are in a position of power and can dominate others. But in Foucauldian sense, power is not something that can be owned or held but cannot be held or possessed, it rather acts and reflects itself in a specific way; in reality it is more a strategy rather than a possession of an individual or groups. "Power 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, *Power/Knowledge* 98). This type of power has two main attributes which Sara Mills explains in the following words, "(a) power is a system, a network of relations involving the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor; (b) individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the locus where power and the resistance to it are exerted" (Mills 3) Foucault links the construction of discourse to the exercise of power in 'The Order of Discourse' and points out the inseparable relation between them. Accordingly, a discourse which can be heard and spoken is the production and operation of power. Foucault asserts in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that discourses are not simply grouping of utterances, grouped around a theme or an issue but that discourses are highly regulated grouping of utterances or statements with internal rules. Foucault proclaims:

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.(Foucault, The Order of Discourse 52)

The study of discourse is not simply the analysis of utterances and statements; it is also a concern with the structures and rules of discourse. Foucault termed this type of analysis of discursive structures as 'archaeology'. Foucault further argues that discourses are those sets of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalized force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think.

### ***Characteristics of Power/Knowledge Discourse***

Power relations are determined by various factors like culture, place and time, and therefore Foucault deals with power discourse in contemporary Western society and its salient characteristics and features are as under:

**A.** Power is not a commodity, a position, a prize or a conspiracy. Power not only functions in specific domains of social life, but appears in everyday life. Power exists at all levels and sizes, including the most minute and most intimate, such as the human body.

**B.** Power relations are mobile, changeable and unbalanced. One should not try to find a stable logic in power, or a possibility of balance in its sphere.

**C.** Power is not a thing which is under the control of a specific group or institutions. The purpose of the researcher of power is to explore how it functions in a society in the everyday life of the people.

**D.** Power has a clear and decisive role in our social life. It is multi-directional as it moves from upward to downwards and from bottom to top. As Oliver expresses it, "relations of power are internal conditioned of differential relations: economic, sexual etc." (Oliver 182).

**E.** Power is positive, dynamic and productive in nature and it will not be appropriate to think of power as only coercive, repressive and constraining. In this context, the view point of J. G. Merquior is worth quoting, "Foucault no longer believes that power suppresses, ignores, separates, conceals or hides instead he proposed that power is productive" (Merquior 156).

**F.** Power is a general standard of power relations in a given society at a given time. No-one is outside this standard and no-one is above it. For example, there are certain rules for the jailors and criminals yet the jailors enjoy some benefits or advantages being the incharge of prisons or the designer of the prison structure.

**G.** Mere domination is not the nature or character of power. Domination is there, but power is exercised upon the dominants also and not only upon the have nots or marginalized ones.

**H.** Power is a fundamental element of human agency. Absolute lack of power means ceasing to be a human agent. Power is the human capability to interfere in events and to make a difference.

**I.** Power is an integral part of the social communication and it is an indispensable feature of social life.

**J.** Power is a process and an element which meddles between social frame work and human agency and their relation is systematic, organised and forceful.

**K.** Power is undoubtedly related with oppression and domination but power is also productive and makes development possible. Power is positive and productive and it should not be considered only as repressive and suppressive.

**L.** Power is closely linked with knowledge like the two sides of the same coin. In this regard, Townley comments, “Mechanisms of power are simultaneously instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge” (Townley 48).

**M.** Power/Knowledge functions through discourse. Relations of power “cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of discourse which operates through and on the basis of this association” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 93).

**N.** Discourse is that specific and organised statement which has some influence, force and authority. But discourse is not uniform everywhere as it changes from person to person and from place to place because nothing is permanent in discourse and everything is in a state of flux and evolution.

**O.** Discourse produces power and knowledge but the notion of constraint and exclusion is very significant in Foucault’s investigation of discourse

Conclusively, Foucault has transformed and almost brought a revolution in the sphere of English studies by writing on the subjects of power, knowledge, discourse, giving it a distinct shape that when a contemporary trend in language and literature is to be established, one has to depend on Foucault. His quest into the philosophy of academic departments is beneficial and helpful to explore English as an academic discipline. Prominent critics and thinkers like Diana Fuss, Stuart Hall, David Bartholomew have tried hard to develop discourses which doubt the harsh rules and regulations for textual analysis and have found that Foucault was a very significant authority on

this subject. In his essay 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms' Stuart Hall employs Foucault as the pivot and focal point of his hypothesis that the culture of structuralism using power/knowledge as the fundamental rule to legitimize Foucault as a touchstone and an unshakable authority on how knowledge is produced through the organisation of cultural and social institutions.

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