_____

Michel Foucault and his Conceptions of Author and Authorship
_____

Dr.B.Tirupati Rao, Department of English & Communications, Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh.

_____

Abstract

Among the many concepts that have been problematized by the post-Structuralist thought after 1960s, the idea of the author is an important one. Roland Barthes' Death of the Author and Michel Foucault's What is an Author tried to analyze the historical evolution of the author and the role that the concept has played in understanding the texts, both literary and philosophical. Foucault's concern is to show the author's relationship with the text and the change of this relationship in the various phases of history. In the process, he raises numerous questions with regard to the names and proper names, the function of the author, and types of the authors. This paper Michel Foucault and His Conceptions of Author and Authorship makes an attempt to analyze the general thought structure of Foucault and his historical reading of the emergence of the Author in the Western tradition.

Keywords: Author, Authorship, truth, truth-regimes, method, discourse, author-function, text and textuality.

Through his path-breaking works Foucault became popular throughout the world. His analysis of modern discursive network in the study of power made him an exceptional thinker. His focus on questions related to madness, social discipline, body-image, truth, normative sexuality etc. were instrumental in designing the post-modern intellectual landscape and his 'methods' though he did not accept that he had a specific method transformed the way the world understands certain issues like power, knowledge, government, self and author. His ideas on history inspired the historians after 1960 to focus on micro histories. His historical and philosophical investigations have gone through many phases like the archaeological, the genealogical, and the ethical. Most of the works of Foucault reveal how "truths" have changed over the centuries, from age to age and culture to culture.

In What is Author Foucault deals with the relationship between author and the text. He focuses on the manner in which texts point to the author figures. He begins his discussion with his earlier work The Order of Things. In that book he investigates into the conditions of possibility under which human beings become objects of knowledge. His intention is to identify and explain the

_____

rules and laws that govern the formation of systems in human sciences that emerged in nineteenth century. His attention is primarily in discourses or discursive practices. He questions the most fundamental assumptions of literary theory and criticism. He discusses the 'functions' that the author fulfills within a given discourse. The concept of author according to him is an organizing device, in which the readers group certain texts together. This process results in developing a number of interpretative traditions, because of certain kind of unity or coherence will be identified in the writings of a single author. It also generates the idea that author is the source of the meaning of the text.

In the recent times in the Western tradition Roland Bathes and Foucault problematized the concept author, which has been given tremendous importance in the Modernity tradition. Foucault's "What is an Author?" reflects on the thought of on Barthes on the concept of authorship. In the Structuralist phase of his writing Barthes identified that the "Author" came into being during a certain historical period and analyzed discussed how the concept of "author". Foucault took a different position with regard to the emergence of the Author. Foucault talks about the concept of work and the functional role of the author, which he calls author function.

All the interpretations of the text refer only to the writer and take his/her biography, psychology and intentions into account. "The author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of

material that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials". (Vincent 2001:1617)

According to Foucault in the past the authors wrote in order to protect themselves against death. As the writing remains forever, they felt that writer also would be remembered for ever. The concept of the relationship between the author and death emerged in the Greek epics. The central character of Greek epics wants continuation of his immortality. In the article Foucault mentions One Thousand and One Nights where Sheherazade seeks to forestall death by telling stories during the entire night. According to Foucault the idea of perpetuating or postponing death in the case of the Greek epic and the Arabian tales were metamorphosed by the Western society.

Just as Sheherazade sacrificed a night's sleep to combat death, the writer sacrifices his very existence. Foucault reverts to Western writers. He mentions Flaubert, Proust and Kafka and says that three writers have a commonality, in which that their characters become absent at a certain point in the story.

In Foucault begins his article by quoting Samuel Beckett, who wrote, "What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking?" The question that Foucault raised exhibits certain amount indifference to the concept of the author and or to the existence of the author. Foucault says that writing goes beyond its own rules and limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest the act of writing. Rather it

_____

creates a space in which the writing subject disappears forever. In this way writing is associated with sacrifice. Writing can be a sight in which the author is killed and the writing stands a murder of its own writer as it cancels out the sings of a particular induvial, called author. In the absence of the author or the death of the author we have to locate the empty space left by him/her.

Foucault in his article targets 'humanism'. Leitch says:

Foucault's ultimate target here is 'humanism', the postmedieval understanding of who and what individuals are. He highlights the historical contingency of the belief that we are individuals with unique natures, possessing coherent interior identities, motives, desires and conscious intentions that cause our actions. Humanism claims for each individual the capacities that literary criticism ascribes to authors. (1617)

In the article, Foucault questions the notion of work, the idea of work and the elements of the work. To drive his idea clearly, he refers the well-known French writer Marquis de Sade, who was not considered an author in his lifetime. He was generally considered as an unhinged human being who had written his desires by being motivated by a strong urge. If this fact is known to readers, then, Foucault asks if the reader can consider that his writings are merely rolls of scribbled papers. Later he considers all forms of writing and

announces that the determination of written forms such as drafts and addresses as works. In the later part of the article Foucault discusses the notion of writing.

Foucault further focuses on the ways in which an author's name "functions" in our society. After thoroughly discussing proper names, he concludes that the names of the authors often serve as a classificatory function. According to him the author-function reveals the convergence of a complex web of discursive practices.

Foucault classifies the author-function into four different characteristics:

According to Foucault at a particular point of time in history certain texts and discourses began to have authors. Such authors were made responsible for their writing or for discourses. Whenever the discourses were transgressive the authors were punished for such writings. Author function, according to Foucault is an ideological function and it is not just a fact about the text. Second, Different texts will have different author function. For example, in the Middle Ages scientific texts had authors to prove their truth, where as in the case of fictional texts such a kind of need did not exit. Anonymity was not acceptable in the case of scientific texts. Foucault says:

The "author function" is not universal or constant in all discourse. Even within our civilization, the same types of texts have not always required authors, there was a

_____

time when those texts which we now call "literary" (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author. (1628)

In fact, during Middle Ages, text which are related to the scientific subjects like cosmology, medicine, and geography were only considered truthful during the Middle Ages if the names of the authors were mentioned.

In the view of Foucault, in the 17th and 18th centuries, scientific texts began to speak for themselves, to be objective, and thus to be judged on the basis of the arguments presented and not on the authority of an individual author's name. Literary works, in this era, began to be evaluated on the basis of the notion of the author--hence the emergence of the idea of "Shakespeare" as "author function," not just as some guy who hung out in London theaters in the Elizabethan era.

Third, in all most all the cases the construction of author for a text always comes from the idea of an author who resides outside the text. That means the author does not emerge from the text. The author's function is not formed spontaneously, through some simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. In fact, it results from various cultural constructions, in which we choose certain attributes of an individual as "authorial" attributes, and dismiss others.

According to Foucault philosophers and poets are not constructed as authors in the same way, but that there are some transhistorical constants in how authors are culturally constructed. He looks to St. Jerome as "author function". Finally, the author is a particular source of expression...who is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in a text, in letters, fragments, drafts, and so forth." (1627)

Unlike a proper name the name of the author remains at the contours of texts. The construction of author does not refer to oneself. It is also a complex grammatical operation that can give rise to many selves. According to him when a narrator in a novel is narrated in first person, the "I" refers to a space in between that society has labelled author" but could be labelled differently.

According to Foucault, it is false to consider the function of author as a pure and simple reconstruction of a fact, because the text is constructed with a number of sings that refer to the author. Hence, it is important to note that these elements have different bearing on the text with an author. Foucault concludes his argument about the author-function in the following lines:

the "author function"- function is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to it creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer purely and simply, to an actual individual

_____

insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to series of subjective postions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (1631)

Foucault says that the author function has not always been deemed necessary to the apprehension and interpretation of texts According to Foucault, before 1500 anonymous texts were the norm. Even in the present time, the importance given to authors changes from discipline to discipline. For example, a contact has no author. We don't remember the authors of newspaper articles. Now the name of the author to a discourse became a matter of prestige.

At the end of the article, Foucault talks about the idea of a trans discursive position. According to Foucault, Homer, Aristotle, and the Church Fathers played this, as did the first mathematicians and the originators of the Hippocratic tradition. In his view such figures as Marx and Freud radically shift an entire mode of thinking; the discourses they initiate make them more than just "authors" or "author functions" in the ways we've been talking about. I won't go into the details of Foucault's argument about this here; it takes us further into Foucault's own position as the architect of analysis of discourses. He says:

The distinctive contribution of these authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts. In this sense, their role differs entirely from that of a novelist, for example, who is basically never more than the author of his own text. Freud in not simply the author of The Interpretation of Dreams or of Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious and Marx is not simply the author of the Communist Manifesto or Capital: they both established the endless possibility of discourse. (1632)

What Foucault wants to tell here that Marx and Freud were not acting as the authors of certain texts; rather they have produced the possibilities and formations of other texts. Because of that they opened a new field of divergence of their own discourse. Their discourses are applicable or applied, whereas in the case a discourse of a novel it is not possible. Marxism can be used to analyze a novel, but a novel cannot be used to analyze Marxism.

In his conclusion, Foucault declares that the notion of discourse is not homogenous but culture-bound. Every society has its own understanding of discourse.

To understand Foucault argument better, we should compare his text with The Death of the Author by Roland Barthes. The basic premise of the both texts is the same. They state that a literary text should be defined on its own terms and by its own language. A literary text cannot be read in relation to its author. Barthes declares that "the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author". Foucault in his turn deconstructs the myth of the author and authorship and analyses the relationship between the author and the work. Both the writers feel that the authorship distorts and limits a text. Hence, both are for the downfall of author.

_____

References:

Canguilhem, G. & Foucault, M. (1991). The Normal and the Pathological MIT Press.

Foucault, M. (1965). Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of

Reason. (R. Howard trans). London: Tavistock, 1965.

Foucault, M. (1976). Mental Illness and Psychology. (A. M. Sheridan-Smith). New York: Harper and Row.

Foucault, M. (1973). The Birth of the clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception. (A. M.

Sheridan-Smith trans). London: Tavistock, 1970.

Foucault, M. (1970). The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences. (Trans anonymous) London: Tavistock.

Foucault, M. (1972). The Archeology of Knowledge, (A. M. Sheridan-Smith trans). London: Tavistock.

Foucault, M. (1981). 'The Order of Discourse' (R. Young trans). In Untying the Text: A

Poststructuralist Reader. R. Young (ed.) London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1975). I, Pierre Rivere, Having Slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother: A Case

of parricide in Nineteeth Century, ed. Foucault. (F. Jellinek trans). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. (A. M. Sheridan-Smith trans). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1978). The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. (R. Hurley trans).

Harmondsworth: Penguin. Foucault, M. (1980). Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteeth-Century French Hermaphrodite, Edited and with a note by Foucault, (R. McDougall trans). New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1985). The Use of Pleasure, (R. Hurley trans). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1986). The Care of the Self. (R. Hurley trans.) Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1989). This is not a Pipe University of California Press.

Lechte, John (1994) "Michel Foucault." Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity. New York: Routledge,

Lechte, John.(2010) The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, London: W. W. Norton & Company