

A Panoptical Analysis of Kurtz and Jack

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Abstract

This article offers a Panoptical reading of the characters Kurtz and Jack of *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902/2006) and *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954) respectively. It discusses how the circumstantial detachment from human civilization and seclusion of these characters led them to their moral degradation. In his writing “Discipline and Punish” (2001, 2004), Michele Foucault proposes that European civilization is a Panoptical one, i.e., resembling a prison. He suggests that through the means of knowledge, power, surveillance, fear and physical domination, an authoritative figure can subjugate the weaker ones. A close reading of the characters of Kurtz and Jack discloses how they have exercised power to exploit the natives or the weak by using the means of surveillance and panoptic vision and other terms proposed by Foucault. Though, both the texts deal with the theme of the exercise of power differently- Kurtz uses his knowledge and power to subjugate the natives of Congo whereas Jack and his disciples try to dominate the little children only to prove their authorities- the implication of Foucault’s terms in these texts is apparent. This research will be conducted through the use of several secondary sources mainly focusing on the terms used by Foucault.

Keywords: Power, discipline, surveillance, isolation, panopticism

Both *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902/2006) and *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954) deal with what happens to human beings when they live far away from human civilization. Both novels

deal with the way the characters try to justify their rights to exercise power. These texts portray how civilized people become worse than the savages when they live far away from civilized society. They exercise power to dominate those they consider are inferior to them. In the pretense of upgrading their subjects, they dominate them. The terms used by Michel Foucault in his writing “Discipline and Punish” (2001, 2004) could be used to analyze these texts, focusing principally on the elements of surveillance and fear. This paper will deal with the idea of how the characters of these two texts have exercised power to exploit the natives or the weak by using the means of surveillance and panoptic vision. By the means of “discipline” and “surveillance,” the dominants keep their subjects in constant fear so that they do not dare to oppose them.

The main argument in this article is how Foucault’s terms used in “Discipline and Punish” (2004) to explain the relationship between the subjugation of body and soul and an individual to demonstrate the power of the authority can be used to analyze the characters of the above mentioned texts. To support this argument, several secondary sources dealing with the topic has been used in this paper. The characters of these texts were members of civilized societies. Yet, due to different circumstances, they get detached from the human civilization and as a result, they become reckless and cruel. Different terms used by Foucault in his “Discipline and Punish” (2004) is applicable to all these characters to explain why they act this way when they are far away from civilization.

Michel Foucault begins his writing “Discipline and Punish” (2004) with the history of the body. He discusses the effect power has on the body of the prisoners and how the power relation invests the body with “relations of power and domination” (p. 549). He also says that before the eighteenth century, there was capital punishment to create a fear of punishment among the criminals, but after that, it became more controlled. By subjecting the body, the new penal system also affected the soul through severe order and subjection “without involving violence” (Foucault, 2004, p. 549). Then he talks about the ‘Panopticon’ system of Bentham and how the constant vigilance of the prisoners by the jailor creates a sense of invisible presence among them and how they act properly because of the fear created “by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power” (Foucault, 2004, p. 552). He also states that the exercise of power is a strategy and that power and knowledge are correlated. He further comments that panopticism exists throughout the society in the form of schools, hospitals, and the army. In this text, he compares western civilization to “the Panopticon” of Bentham.

Exercise of Power through Fear and Indiscrimination

According to Foucault (2004), there will always be an exercise of power as a strategy to dominate others. We can see this in *Heart of Darkness*, as the Belgian Trading Company send their people to colonize the natives in the guise of ivory collection. To collect the ivories, the Company have to exercise their power because they are afraid that the natives would attack them. The exercise of power in this novella is apparent in the way the company people torture the natives. A native gets beaten in the suspicion that he has burned the shed, “A nigger was being beaten near by”

(Conrad, 2006, p. 43). Similarly, the Pilgrims carry the white sticks to show their authority and to generate fear among the natives, “They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands” (Conrad, 2006, p. 42). The White Pilgrims have created a sense of fear among the natives by flaunting their self-righteous sticks. The justification of this display of power could be seen further when “the indefatigable man with the mustaches” justifies the beating of the native, “serve him right. Transgression – punishment – bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That’s the only way” (Conrad, 2006, p. 45). All these displays of power are done in the name of colonizing the natives. As Zengin (2007) states,

Heart of Darkness has enabled us to locate the text in the complex system of power relations and cultural representations which compose the discourse of colonialism and to see how the text is, in fact, participating and complicit in the European discourse of colonial control. (p. 111)

In *Lord of the Flies*, the exercise of power is evident in the way Jack’s gang ties up the twins Sam and Eric as a punishment for the twins support Ralph. They leave them tied overnight until they too join their gang, “Now the painted group felt the otherness of Samneric, felt the power” (Golding, 1954, p. 220) and Jack threatens them with a spear until they do so. However, unlike *Heart of Darkness*, the children do not use physical punishment to dominate the weaker ones; they only create a sense of fear of it.

The true presence of fear is explicit in the way the weaker ones are afraid of the leaders. In *Lord of the Flies*, this is visible when the “biguns” (the older kids) scare the “littleuns” (the younger kids) by talking about the presence of “a beastie” (an imaginary monster) in the island. However, in the end, the biguns also become the victim of collective fear of the beast, and they all, in turn, begin to believe in the existence of the beast. Jack is the ferocious one among them and he and his gang terrorize the younger kids. Jack shows his authority by causing the fear of physical punishment among the little kids. Daniella Carpi (2007) describes Jack in this way:

Jack is a sadistic individual, that contests the legal authority represented by Ralph, which defies the law of obedience to the chosen chief (Ralph). He symbolizes the great criminal that exerts a perverse fascination on the rest of the children, that challenges rules bringing to the forefront the hidden violence of rules themselves, that stifle the anarchic sense of freedom of every single individual. (p. 6)

Although, the real sadistic one is Roger, who eventually kills Piggy because he is feeling abandoned. He is the one who almost shoves Jack out of the way to punish Sam and Eric “as one wielding a nameless authority” (Golding, 1954, p. 224).

In *Heart of Darkness*, the implementation of fear is constant. This is discernible in the starvation of the cannibals. They fed on rotten hippo meats, but they were not bold enough to fight for their basic rights with the white even though they outnumbered the white people. Marlow notices this restraint on them, “why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn’t

go for us” (Conrad, 2006, p. 65). As per Foucault (2004), the individuals within the spaces of a Panopticon do possess agency and engage in multiple forms of resistance to the structures of surveillance in which they exist, but the crew never act upon them.

Another point of Foucault (2004) was that power is exercised irrespective of designation in a Panopticon. This exercise of power creates a sense of fear among the natives, so it becomes easy to rule them because the authority does not hesitate to punish even the leaders of their subjects. This form of punishment is apparent in *Heart of Darkness* (2006) in the way Fresleven went and “started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick” (Conrad, p. 24), thinking that he had been wronged in a bargain of a hen. As Foucault (2001) says, “the best way of avoiding serious offenses is to punish the most minor offenses very severely” (1637). From the steamboat, Marlow saw “near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls” (Conrad, 2006, p. 79). Kurtz uses the severed heads of the natives as a caution to other natives not to cross the white. As Zengin (2007) asserts:-

His brutality is apparent in the part in which Marlow sees the sunken heads on poles at Kurtz’s station... Kurtz had probably turned their faces to the house to be seen by the natives so that the natives would recognize his power. (p. 121)

This type of fear creates a sense of surveillance among the natives and they remain disciplined, without the threat of any rebellion. Thus, Foucault’s notion of the exercise of power to subjugate the weaker ones is apparent in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord of the Flies*.

Panopticon: An Instrument of Surveillance

While discussing the modern penal system, Foucault (2004) has used Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. Panopticon is a circular building where the prisoners are kept under the surveillance of only one guard. Foucault (2004) states that it is “an annular building, at the center, a tower...the panoptic mechanism arranges spetial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (p. 554). This term is applicable to these two literary pieces in consideration. In *Heart of Darkness*, the hut where Kurtz lives is surrounded by the forest giving it the shape of a Panopticon; Kurtz can easily keep eyes on the natives, and the natives can in return keep a lookout from the jungle without the risk of being seen. Marlowe describes the jungle, “the woods were unmoved like a mask- heavy like the closed door of a prison” (Conrad, 2006, p. 56). Here, Marlowe has directly compared the jungle to a prison emphasizing on the impossible gaze of the natives on Kurtz. Foucault (2004) talks about the prisoner kept in a Panopticon, “he is seen, but he does not see” (p. 554). Here, Foucault talks about the constant watch the authority has on the prisoner, which is similar to the way Kurtz and the natives keep eyes on each other.

Foucault (2004) asserts that there is no need for constant surveillance if the captives think they are being watched. This notion creates an automatic functioning of power the authority

has established. Kurtz must have created automatic surveillance over the natives since the beginning, so that he can keep the discipline intact. Even when he gets sick, the natives do not try to overthrow or disobey him, because he has been successful in creating a sense of permanent observation among them. It can safely be assumed that in the beginning, it was Kurtz who used to keep surveillance on the natives to keep them in constant fear of being watched, but in the end, it was the natives who began to fix their gaze upon him. The woods surrounding his hut could be used by both the Company people and the natives to keep a lookout around their surroundings and on each other. However, when Marlow comes to take Kurtz away, the natives are the ones keeping vigilance on Kurtz or the ones who try to rescue him, "... where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil" (Conrad, 2006, p. 94).

Similarly, in *Lord of the Flies*, the platform where the kids have their council, is a circular place made by stumps of woods. There are several references in the book where the kids say they feel like someone is watching them through the woods. After the fear of the beast grips them, they feel the beast is constantly watching them. This feeling is described in the novel, "but when you're on your own... if you're hunting sometimes you catch yourself feeling as if-" (Golding, 1954, p. 67). Here Jack's unfinished sentence indicates the feeling of being watched. There are several instances of spying on the opposition groups in this novel, too. Ralph keeps vigilance on the Castle Rock to observe the activities of Jack's group when Jack was hunting for him. The hunting of the pigs also needed strong surveillance as knowing about the beasts' movements and habits are necessary in order to hunt them.

Foucault (2004) discusses about the necessity of background light in the Panopticon. He says that to be invisible to the prisoner, the warden has to be placed behind the source of light so that the inmate cannot see him but has the feeling of being watched and would behave accordingly. Foucault contrasts darkness and light while discussing the effect of light, "Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 2004, p. 554). The main setting of *Heart of Darkness* is a jungle, where there is a constant play of light and darkness. Inside the jungle, it is hard to comprehend if someone is keeping a lookout on anyone. Likewise, in *The Lord of the Flies*, when Ralph administers a group meeting, he seats behind the fire (Golding, 1954, p. 96) and his co-inhabitants of the island are unable to see him because the fire in front of him makes it impossible to see the reactions on his face, and this acts on his favor as he can easily hide his emotions from others. This made him similar to the guard in Panopticon as Foucault (2004) asserts, "in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (p. 555). This placing of backlighting allows the characters of both the texts to display their authority by being invisible.

Foucault (2004) comments that western society itself is a Panopticon. He argues about how important it is at present times because the society itself has created some institutions where constant vigilance is required to establish discipline. He compares family, school, hospitals, and police with each other as the new versions of Panopticon where the children, the students, the patients or the inmates are under constant supervision. He remarks, "Our society is one

not of spectacles, but of surveillance” (Foucault, 2004, p. 562). Foucault (2001) also says, “the carceral archipelago transported this technique from the penal institution to the entire social body” (p. 1640). When Roger finds Henry and another kid playing on the beach, he throws stones at them, but then he stops because he realizes that “round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policeman and the law” (Golding, 1954, p. 78). Even though the kids are far away from the protection of the civilized society, Roger is hesitant to be brutal to them because his society has implemented a sense of constant surveillance in him by teaching him that torturing another human is bad. As Carpi (2007) observes, “Even in absentia the rules they have been reared to are still strong: the commandment “don’t kill” is what blocks their first killing of the wild pig” (p. 4). In *Heart of Darkness* too, the influence of society and law is visible. When discussing Kurtz’s isolation, Marlow talks about the power “the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums” (Conrad, 2006, p. 75) have, because the fear of these terrors stops the citizens to commit crimes, but as Kurtz is away from all these systems, he commits unimaginable crimes.

Devotion and Power

Kurtz, in the process of ruling the natives, has created a group of devout followers- “Kurtz has taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” (Conrad, 2006, p. 75). Foucault describes that a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. This is explicit in the way the Savage Woman and the Intended show their devotion to Kurtz, or how because of the Russian’s fascination for Kurtz, Marlow sarcastically calls him Kurtz’s “last disciple.” In *The Lord of the Flies* in the case of Jack, this kind of devotion is evident, too. He generates terror among the kids, especially among his choir group, but still, they hang to his speech. As Piggy says, “If you’re scared of someone you hate him but you can’t stop thinking about him” (Golding, 1954, p. 116). The constant fear of being watched over by the Beast, especially at night, also creates a sense of devotion among the kids to it. In turn, they sacrifice a pig to satisfy it and dance like savages which results in the killing of Piggy.

Power and Knowledge

Foucault also asserts how power and knowledge are inter-related. He says that to successfully exercise power, one has to have proper knowledge of his target subjects. This knowledge of power is apparent in Kurtz. He is a British citizen and an educated person, “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad, 2006, p. 76), so he is a representative of European civilization. Marlow’s childhood dream of conquering the undiscovered lands makes him attain knowledge to rule the ‘savages,’ just like Kurtz. This thirst for knowledge also helps the characters to know about each other. Before even meeting Kurtz in person, Marlow gets a good idea about him from the descriptions he receives from the people who know Kurtz. However, Kurtz implements his knowledge to dominate the natives. Foucault (2004) says, that to dominate the ruled, it is important to know how to subjugate them. He also comments that “in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating” (p.1644). In the paper that he wrote for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Kurtz shows

how well he knows the way to dominate his subjects; he discusses the processes the white should apply in order to control the blacks. According to Foucault, the dominants have to know how to subjugate the body to show power over the subjects. He says, “power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another (Foucault, 2004, p. 550). In his paper, Kurtz shows how well he knows about the demonstration of authority: “By the simple means of our will, we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (Conrad, 2006, p. 76).

The knowledge of power could also be found in *Lord of the Flies*. The boys are British, they are from a choir school, so they are from a disciplined society. The way they tried to establish a democratic habitat on the island indicates their knowledge of how a civilized society works. The Conch acts as a tool here; whoever holds it, is allowed to talk while others are supposed to listen. They try to establish a democratic society where whoever holds the conch can speak uninterruptedly. Regarding the conch, Bhadury (2013) comments, “The conch as the symbol of power and authority has in itself double fanged teeth and the orifice is maze like structure, not something straight” (p. 110). Their display of power does not include the brute strength Kurtz talks about, but of their solid knowledge about democracy, hunting and the sense of authority over the weak, or in this case, the little ones. Jack arrogantly claims himself as the chief because he knows that he is superior to the other kids, “because I’m chapter chorister and head boy” (Golding, 1954, p. 29).

Body as a Tool of Power

Michel Foucault (2004) proclaims that “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (p. 549). He says that there is an inherent relationship between the subjection of the body and soul and the rate of production. He further discusses how production can increase if the workers are completely subjected. The subjection makes the body a forceful and productive instrument. He also says that this could be achieved “without involving violence” (Foucault, 2004, p. 549). In *Heart of Darkness*, we can see it in the way the crew was starved, as well as in the beating and torturing of the natives, and the exploitation of the subjects of Kurtz. The Company people went to Congo to collect ivories and they disciplined the souls of the natives by inflicting physical pain; or worse, the fear of physical pain, to make them work more, and to increase the amount of ivory collection. The white sticks and weapons of the Faithless Pilgrims are examples of this kind of display of fear. Though they never beat the natives or effectively use the weapons, they get the best result from their subject by merely displaying their armaments. Without actually inflicting physical torture on the natives, the Pilgrims make them work more and they acquire more ivories. Foucault (2001) comments about the jailor of Panopticon, “their task was to produce bodies that were both docile and capable” (1637). In *Lord of the Flies*, the older kids bully the younger ones by making them collect the firewood, fruits, water and when they were making shelters, the bigger kids frighten the little ones to be more active. As Carpi (2007) comments about the unequal distribution of work among the younger children, “they must distribute duties (Jack should be the head of the hunters), some children provide food, some others direct the assemblies, they

should keep a fire burning, etc” (p. 5). Thus, the big kids of *The Lord of the Flies* make the little kids work more by frightening and threatening them.

Seclusion and Power

The main aim of the Panopticon is to isolate the prisoners from society and from the other prisoners too when they are imprisoned in different cells. Foucault (2004) has used the example of Panopticon to compare the Western democrats to their jail-keepers because like the latter, they too, check their criminal instincts and become their jailors. Foucault (2001) further comments on the isolation of the inmate, “isolation is the best means of acting on the moral nature” (p. 1637). Kurtz is all alone among the natives in the jungle because the Belgian Company felt the necessity to colonize them. Kurtz is the Company’s representative in the jungle, but his isolation is apparent in the novella. Marlowe talks about Kurtz’s alienation among the natives several times. He says that alienation has a great impact on the soul of an individual and it can drive him to unimaginable urges, “things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solicitude” (Conrad, 2006, p. 87). Similarly, the kids in *Lord of the Flies* are isolated too. They take refuge in an uninhabited island, where there are no adults, which they celebrate at first, but as time goes by, they feel like they are too lonely in the vast island. Just like Kurtz became a victim of his isolation and did unthinkable acts, the kids also became savages. Their solitude is apparent from the very beginning, through the description of the jungle, Golding (1954) has emphasized on the alienation of the kids.

Conclusion

Thus, even though both the books are set far away from England, these texts could be examined through Foucault’s theory of Panopticon in terms of the exercise of power, surveillance, subjugation of human body and mind, devotion and different types of Panopticons. The texts deal with various apparent themes, but in a subtle way, Foucault’s concept is existent in these books. One of the main ideas propagated by Foucault is that isolation is the key to correct a criminal, however, in the case of Kurtz and Jack, this works in reverse. At the end, the children get rescued from the island so there is a possibility of their redemption but Kurtz dies without receiving the opportunity to salvage himself.

Through this discussion, it is clear that Foucault’s theory is existent in every sphere of modern life. Both Kurtz and Jack try to rise in their position by instigating fear among their subjects. Mostly, this exercise of power is explicit through surveillance and fear. Foucault has explicitly described the necessity of the feeling of being watched constantly which generates fear among the inmates. The characters of both these texts suffer from this feeling - the natives are watched by Kurtz and the Company people, and there is an unknown presence, symbolizing western civilization that keeps the children in constant observation but fails at the end when the children act like savages. Complete devotion to the leader is also prominent which results from fear. The devotion of the people around Kurtz is the result of the fear he can inflict upon them, while Jack receives devotion because he has a natural ability to be a leader.

Foucault has concluded his article by asserting that western civilization is itself a modern prison because the people have the fear of getting punished by the power of the authority. Both the analyzed writings are examples of the way western people are imprisoned through the use of the institutions they have made, which keep them in constant vigilance even when they are away from human civilization.

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