## Lecture 20

## Poststructuralism: Michel Foucault

### Introduction

Hello and welcome to another lecture on literary theory. Today we will be continuing with our discussion on poststructuralism and we will be doing so by focussing on the writings of Michel Foucault. Now we have already seen how the linguistic turn, by the time it reaches poststructuralist scholars like Roland Barthes gets a political nuance. We also found this political nuance informing Derrida's strategy of deconstruction. But the political texture of language uses was perhaps best explored by Michel Foucault through his concept of discourse. It is this concept of discourse that will form our central preoccupation in today's lecture. But before we move on to the concept of discourse and its relation to power politics let us familiarise us with some biographical details of Foucault.

### Michel Foucault

Foucault was born in 1926 in Poitiers in mainland France and was educated in such prestigious institutes of higher education in Paris called École Normale Supérieure and the University of Sorbonne. He held several diplomatic posts across the world before returning to academics as a teacher and his longest association as a professor was with Collège de France where he taught History of Systems of Thought. Foucault was afflicted by AIDS and died in 1984 at the age of fifty-seven. His book, the *Folie et Déraison* which was first published in French in 1961 and whose title has variously been translated in English as *The History of Madness* and *Madness and Civilization* established his reputation as one of the major intellectuals of our times and this reputation grew with major subsequent publications like *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of*

*Discourse*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*. These were however, only the major works that were published during his lifetime. A large collection of his lectures delivered in Collège de France are still in the process of being published as a series and so for the academic world at large Foucault's writings still remain a living archive. Like his contemporary, Jacques Derrida, Foucault is a wonderfully eclectic scholar who has put forward a number of novel ideas that are used in a wide variety of academic fields like philosophy, literary studies, history of sciences, sociology and so on and so forth. But again, like in our lecture on Derrida, we would not try to arrive at a comprehensive picture of all of these ideas because given the time restriction that will result only in a very superficial understanding of Foucault. We would rather approach Foucault as a poststructuralist which means we will primarily focus on those aspects of Foucault which directly relates to the discussion on things like author, text and language which we had initiated with our lecture on Ferdinand de Saussure. And I think the best way to see how Foucault build on the structuralist/poststructuralist tradition while simultaneously critiquing it is to start with his 1969 essay "What is an author?".

**What is an author?**

Now if you remember our lecture on Barthes you will know that Barthes had famously announced the death of the author as a subject who stands outside the text and pours meaning into it. For Barthes, working along the lines of structuralism, language that formed a text was a self-contained structure whose meaning making process depended upon the internal relations of its constituent parts. The author, as far as Barthes is concerned is a bourgeois fiction or myth. Derrida too worked with the assumption that there is no external author figure who acts as what he calls a "transcendental signified" and who fixes the meaning within the language structure of a text while himself remaining above and beyond it. Indeed, Derrida argued that the absence of

an author figure who can fix the meaning of signifiers within a text results in an interminable interplay of meanings which he referred to by the novel portmanteau word “différance”. Foucault in his turn approaches the issue of author and authorship through a completely different question. Even if we agree that author as a subject situated prior to a text is a bourgeois fiction then why is such a fiction necessary? In other words, if the author is required as a concept within certain specific socio-cultural and political milieus then what guides that requirement? Even more simply put, why do we need the author?

Foucault answers this question by first noting the fact the name of the author represents a special kind of a proper noun which incorporates two functions – the functions of designation and the function of description. Now the function of designation is something that the author’s name shares with any other proper name. For instance, my name is Sayan and whenever this name is uttered it amounts to a gesture of pointing towards me, the human subject. Similarly, if I say William Shakespeare, that name too will function as a gesture which points to a specific human subject, a real-historical figure who existed at a particular time and a particular place. When people like Barthes or even Derrida questions the relationship between the author and the text they usually mean this real historical figure that is designated by the proper name of the author. But even if we set this designative function of the author’s name aside, we are faced with the idea of the author as a descriptive category. In other words, if we refer to the author William Shakespeare for instance what we have in mind in not simply the identity of a person but also the description of a particular body of writing. Our understanding of the author, William Shakespeare, as a descriptive category will change for instance if we come to know that the sonnets that goes under the authorship of Shakespeare were actually written by someone else. In that case even if the real historical person designated by the name William Shakespeare remains

the same our understanding of the author William Shakespeare changes. So even if we do not concern ourselves with the presence of a real historical person standing prior to the text and claiming to be its author, Foucault argues that we are nevertheless left with this idea of author as a descriptive category "marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being".

This descriptive aspect of the author is therefore distinct from and independent of the idea of author as a subject, and to make this distinction clear Foucault refers to this descriptive aspect of authorship as the "author function". Now note here that where the author as the subject stands outside the language or discourse of his text, the author function is integral to the textual discourse and emerges from within it. To understand this let us understand some of the features that Foucault ascribes to the author function. When we approach the name of William Shakespeare as an author function what it allows us to do is to identify a group of texts as a single category. And it does so in at least four different ways. For instance, if we were to judge whether a particular piece of writing belongs to the category of Shakespeare's work we try and see whether its literary value matches with the other works. In this the assumption is that the name Shakespeare represents a constant level of value. We also see if the particular piece of writing under consideration coheres with the doctrines professed in other writings or not. In this we assume that the name of the author represents a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence. Thirdly, we also note if the piece of writing matches with the stylistic conventions as followed in other Shakespearean works or not. Here the assumption is that the name of the author signifies a stylistic unity. Finally, we also see if the piece of writing falls within the time span in which the other Shakespearean works were produced. And here the assumption is that the name of the author signifies a particular time period which brackets a specific set of social political and

economic events. So as you can see, the author function provides a way of clubbing together a set of texts and as such depends on the features of the discourse present within these texts.

So now that we have identified Foucault's author as author function rather than a human subject let us return to the original question: why do we need the author? Foucault argues that we as a society fear the proliferation of meaning. This fear of proliferation of meaning can be quite clearly seen in the distinction that every society makes between discourses or utterances that are allowed and speech that is regarded as transgressive and therefore is allowed. According to Foucault, the author function is evoked to control the transgressive discourse and the proliferation of dangerous meanings that might disrupt the existing socio-political world order. To understand this through an example let's take the story of Mansur al-Hallaj. Al-Hallaj was a Persian Sufi saint of late $9^{th}$ and early $10^{th}$ century who is best known for his utterance "Ana al-haqq". Now in Arabic this phrase literally translates into "I am the truth". But the word "Al-haqq" in the *Quran* is used as one of the names of Allah. So the phrase "Ana al-haqq" can also be understood as "I am Allah". This second understanding of the phrase "Ana al-haqq" can in turn be interpreted in two different ways. The first interpretation can be that the person uttering the phrase "Ana al-haqq" is claiming himself to be Allah. The other interpretation might be that the person uttering the phrase "Ana al-haqq" is speaking about renouncing his ego and dissolving his individual identity into the greater identity of God. So as you can see here, the same piece of discourse has the potential to create a profusion of meanings if a free play of the meaning-making process is allowed. And some of these meanings that the limitless play generates are positively dangerous within specific socio-political milieus. Thus for instance the interpretation that the one who utters Ana al-Haqq is claiming himself to be the all might Allah was absolutely scandalous when articulated within the theocentric society of $10^{th}$ century Abbassid Caliphate.

According to Foucault, the author function is needed to control this dangerous potentiality inherent in the limitless profusion of meaning. The author function can be evoked to cancel out certain possible meanings of an utterance for instance by stating that such a meaning is not consistent with the doctrines professed in other texts marked by the name of that author. Alternatively, the author can be held guilt of uttering a transgressive discourse and be punished for that. So for instance in the $10^{th}$ century Abassid Caliphate, Mansur al-Hallaj was condemned as a *zindiq* or an apostate sentenced by the caliph to a painful death. Now this punishment did not simply kill off the person designated by the proper name Mansur al-Hallaj, but also suppressed the entire category of discourse that was described by the author function indicated by the name Al-Hallaj. This is because, all the potentially subversive meanings of the phrase "Ana al-haqq" was annulled by marking the author of the phrase as an apostate – a person who has abandoned religion and who therefore is not in a position to utter anything meaningful on the subject of God. In other words, the execution of al-Hallaj was not simply the killing of a person but also an attempt to stop the proliferation and circulation of meanings made possible by the words "Ana al-haqq".

Now, I have presented here a very selective reading of Foucault's essay "What is an Author?". And if you find some of the arguments that I have mentioned here to be interesting then I would definitely recommend you to go and read the full the text of the essay. But even with this selective reading, what I would like to point out to you is the way in which Foucault intervenes into the field of structuralism/poststructuralism by introducing the aspect of political power. In our lectures on Barthes and Derrida we had seen how a language structure can produce an infinity of meaning. But what Foucault tells us through his elaboration on the need for the author function is that this infinity of meaning within any particular social milieu is limited by a

political power structure. As the story of Al-Hallaj showed, there are ways in which certain discourses are regularly suppressed or denied meaning within a particular society, and Foucault provides a wonderful exploration of how the meaning making process is controlled and limited to allow only certain socially and politically sanctioned meanings to emerge. In the remaining part of this lecture we will focus on this particular aspect of Foucault's scholarship.

**What is discourse?**

Now some of you might have noticed that in this lecture on Foucault I have been repeatedly using the word discourse. Now discourse is a very commonly used word, but in Foucault's writings it conveys a rather specialised sense. So let in order to understand Foucault's theory about how the meaning-making processes underlying a discourse is limited and controlled with specific socio-political milieus let us first try and start with the simplest and most mundane definition of the term that we find in a dictionary. Well if we consult a dictionary, we will see that the simplest definition of discourse is that it is a set of meaningful statements, made orally or in writing, on a given topic. This means that in the language of structuralism, discourse means something like parole – that is, a concrete piece of language use. The insight that Michel Foucault brings to this simple definition of discourse is that there are certain deep-seated regulations which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourses. And here I am not talking about the structuring principle of langue. Because even while following the structuring principle of langue, we can theoretically say or write an infinite number of things. But what Foucault says is that though this might be possible theory, in practice the number of meaningful statements that we can make is strictly limited by certain factors. Foucault in his essay "The Order of Discourse" discusses three such factors namely taboo, madness/sanity and institutional ratification.

## Taboo

Let's start with the notion of taboo. In any society at any given point of time there are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics and these topics are regarded as taboos. Any discussion on these topics which are considered taboos are socially looked down upon. Therefore, there is an absence of discourse on certain topics within certain social milieus. In the example of Al-Hallaj that we have discussed, speaking about oneself as god was a topic that was considered taboo. In certain patriarchal societies for instance talking about women's sexual rights might be considered as taboos. In societies which prioritises heterosexuality, the topic of homosexuality might be considered as taboo. And in each of these cases what the taboo does is to stop the proliferation of any meaningful discourse on that topic. Now such prohibited subjects might vary from one society to another and from one time to another, but the fact remains constant that there will always be some subjects on which it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to have socially acceptable discourse. Thus, though in theory the topics on which we can have a discourse is infinite, in practise, we cannot talk or write about anything and everything.

## Madness and Sanity

Apart from taboo, the notion of madness and sanity also acts as another factor limiting the possibility of discourse. For instance, if I say that "elephants are flying in the air" then I would be considered as a mad person. What this will do to my utterances is precisely what the categorisation of Mansur al-Hallaj as an apostate did to his utterances on God—it will all be rendered meaningless. Thus, if discourse is to be understood as composed of meaningful statements, then someone who is deemed mad cannot generate discourse. So even though a mad person might be able to speak, in a society which considers him to be mad, his speech will never gain the acceptance of a discourse.

Now the reason I mentioned that a mad man's speech won't be accepted as discourse within a society that considers him to be mad is that like taboo, the understanding of madness too is specific to certain social milieus. In other words, different societies separated from one another spatially or temporally might construe the idea of madness differently. But irrespective of what a particular society's specific understanding of madness is, the basic concept of madness remains present in all society. Which means that in any given society, at any given point of time, there would always be a group of statements which will be denied the status of discourse because of its association with madness.

**Institutional Ratification**

Apart from taboo and madness Foucault also talks about institutional ratification as an important factor that limits the proliferation of discourse. If we think carefully then we will understand that our process of knowing about things and talking or writing meaningfully about them are closely guided by various institutes, including our schools and colleges, the publishing industry, the news agencies, learned societies, laboratories etc. If I were to state today that the sun goes round the earth, then such a statement won't be admitted as part of a meaningful discourse because it won't be ratified by these institutions which regulate knowledge production and knowledge consumption in today's world. Yet at one point in history this very statement that the sun revolves around the earth enjoyed institutional validity. Thus for instance during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century Europe, it was the geocentric model of the universe that enjoyed institutional validity and proponents of the heliocentric model like Galileo Galilei, who claimed that it was the earth which revolved round the sun and not the other way round, were imprisoned to stop them propagating this new idea. As this example shows, institutions control the discourse by regulating the circulation of statements and by prioritising and foregrounding

certain statements while marginalising and gagging certain other opposing statements. Therefore, the kinds of discourses that are prevalent in any given situation largely depends upon the institutions which regulate and ratify the production and dissemination of knowledge. And if the social situation is underlined by a power imbalance then it is the institutions of the more powerful that gets to regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation.