

## Identity, Anxiety and Disciplinary Power: Of names and disembodied voices in *No God In Sight*

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### Abstract

*In Discipline and Punish (1979) and The History of Sexuality (1980) Michel Foucault talks about the repressive functioning of power. Foucault studies how the nature of political power and control began to change in Europe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards: from control over life and death of the subjects, the nature of power began to diversify and expand to control all aspects of a subject's life including his identity. He explores how the state works as a disciplinary power and utilises a politics of rationality to legitimise its actions. Foucault leads us to question whether the modern nation-state is the ideal form of society, and whether the individual has attained wellbeing in this form of society. In this paper I intend to use the concept of bio-power to study anxiety and fragmentation of selfhood in Altaf Tyrewala's novel *No God in Sight* (2005).*

**KEYWORDS:** identity, outsider, power

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper I wish to discuss notions about the modern nation-state explored by postcolonial theory and use them to study the notions of identity in Altaf Tyrewala's novel *No God in Sight* (2005)<sup>1</sup>. This is a comparatively recent novel and has not been critically studied in a comprehensive manner. *No God in Sight* depicts several individuals stuck in crises, trapped in claustrophobic spaces of the city. It also illustrates the effect of antagonistic discourses on individuals who live in fear of their own identities. The stark monologues of some characters of the novel reveal how such discourses seek to categorize a Muslim as an 'outsider'. Their monologues are not revelations of their political ideas or feelings, but representations of their emotional dilemmas and conflicts. The text may be interpreted as a document representing the alienated and excluded subjectivity, identified by its difference from the 'norm'. Tyrewala incorporates several short narratives into one, breaking away from the confines of a regular and ordered structure. The novel depicts a plurality of voices capturing the endless variety of lives, circumstances, opinions and feelings and through these problematises the notion of citizenship in a modern nation state like India. The individual voices represented are like islands; they seem like subjectivities stranded upon a sea of modernity, living in the isolation of their mental worlds.

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## METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts a critical study of the novel *No God in Sight* with the help of concepts explored under the theoretical domain of Postcolonialism. One of the major arenas of critical exploration in postcolonial theory is the socio-political structure of modern nation-state. It has been examined by theorists from Hegel to Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>. Postcolonial literature around the world, and especially in India, has also treated these notions in various ways. If the literary text is conceived as an imaginative projection of the fears, anxieties and uncertainties affecting citizens of a modern nation-state, it can be analysed with the help of such theories.

## DISCUSSION

Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power<sup>2</sup> has provided us with insights into how the state works as a disciplinary power and utilises a politics of rationality to legitimise its actions. Foucault has traced the genealogy of the modern state and its institutions and its changing relation to human body and mind in his later works. He has argued that the social sciences, in spite of their avowed intentions, have aided the state in justifying and enacting its control over the human being. Foucault leads us to question whether the nation-state is the ideal form of society, and whether the individual has attained wellbeing in this form of society. Although Foucault's models are drawn from Europe and particularly France, these questions become enormously relevant for a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation-state like India.

The origin of a theoretical understanding of the modern nation-state may be traced to Hegel:

Hegel posits the story of 'mankind' as the story of our progression from the darkness of nature into the light of 'History'. The prose of 'History', in turn, delivers the narrative of modernity. 'History' is the vehicle of rational self-consciousness through which the incomplete human spirit progressively acquires an improved sense of its own totality. In other words, 'History' generates the rational process through the alienated essence of the individual citizen acquires a cohesive and reparative identity in the common life of the nation. Thus, for Hegel, the overlapping narratives of 'Reason', 'Modernity' and 'History' reveal their proper 'end' – the final truth of their significance – in the consolidated form of the nation-state. (Gandhi, 1998, 105)<sup>3</sup>

In the above lines, Leela Gandhi shows the influence of Hegel's thinking in the modern formation of the nation-state. Following Hegel, she argues that the individual citizen acquires a 'cohesive and reparative identity'. However, Foucault's analysis leads us to a conflicting and contradictory dialectical position regarding nation-state and citizenship. Foucault does not attack Reason, but shows "how a historical form of rationality has operated" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, 133)<sup>4</sup>. Foucault tells us to reject

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a simplistic understanding of Reason that leads us to believe that “reason can only produce Good and that Evil can only flow from a refusal of reason” (133).

In *Discipline and Punish* (1979)<sup>5</sup>, Foucault had already started analysing the concept of power and the forms in which it is exercised. In his later genealogical work, Foucault demonstrates the concept of bio-power. Bio-power emerges from the analysis of the relationship between truth and power, and Foucault undertakes to emphasise that these are not absolutes, as often posited. He argues in *The History of Sexuality* that modern institutions produce discourses that mask their power: “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault, 1980, 86). “It (modern power) masks itself by producing a discourse, seemingly opposed to it but really part of a larger deployment of power” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, 130). Thus, if the state considers or constructs crime as a discourse against the power of the state, (or put in other words, a force against the ‘legitimate’ power of the state, that the state itself categorises as unlawful and disruptive), then crime itself becomes the cause of enhancing the disciplinary procedures of the state (such as increased surveillance, or creating detailed databases of citizens, creating profiles of criminals) against all citizens, so as to protect them from criminals.

Foucault has demonstrated how this modern form of power came to be created in Europe. He says that institutions of power like the monarch and the state arose from smaller, localized conflicting and competing power centres of feudalism. He says, “Faced with a myriad of clashing forces, these great forms of power functioned as a principle of right that transcended all the heterogeneous claims, manifesting the triple distinctions of a unitary regime, of identifying its will with the law, and of acting through mechanisms of interdiction and sanction” (Foucault, 1980, 87). “The law justified the sovereign both to himself and to his subjects” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 131).

According to Foucault, bio-power emerged as a coherent political technology in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although at that period this was not the dominant form. This was a period when humanitarian ideas about social reform, a new type of political rationality and practice began to emerge. According to Dreyfus and Rabinow,

In the middle of the seventeenth century, the systematic, empirical investigation of historical, geographic, and demographic conditions engendered the modern social sciences. This new knowledge was unmoored from older ethical or prudential modes of thinking and even from Machiavellian advice to the prince. Instead, technical social science began to take form within the context of administration. (134).

These new sciences treated the body as an object of power: “The basic goal of disciplinary power was to produce a human being who could be treated as a ‘docile

body'. "This docile body also had to be a productive body" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 135). Foucault contends that "it was the disciplinary technologies which underlay the growth, spread, and triumph of capitalism as an economic venture. Without the insertion of disciplined, orderly individuals into the machinery of production, the new demands of capitalism would have stymied" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 135). Foucault argues that parallel to the liberating ideas of the French revolution, there was, "in a quieter way, tighter discipline in manufacturing workshops, regimented corvees of vagabonds, and increased police surveillance of every member of the society" which "assured the growth of a set of relations which were not and could not be ones of equality, fraternity and liberty" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 136).

Foucault identifies three stages in the development of political thinking. Referring to Aristotle and the Christian thought of Saint Thomas, he describes the first stage as directed at achieving the good life and belief in an ethical order. The second stage associated with Machiavelli was directed at strengthening the power of the king, and contrary to the previous stage, not being concerned about the virtue, well-being, freedom or peace of the people. The third stage is associated with the rise of reason. In this stage the state becomes an end in itself, without any concern for any ethical order or a particular monarch. The aim of the votaries of this kind of political thinking was to "increase the scope of power for its own sake by bringing the bodies of the state's subjects under tighter discipline" and thus, contrary to the earlier stages, here "the object to be understood by administrative knowledge was not the rights of the people, not the nature of divine or human law, but the state itself" (Dreyfus and Rabinow,137). Foucault says,

From the idea that the state has its own nature and its own finality, to the idea that man is the true object of the state's power, as far as he produces a surplus strength, as far as he is a living, working, speaking being, as far as he constitutes a society, and as far as he belongs to a population in an environment, we can see the increasing intervention of the state in the life of the individual. The importance of life for these problems of political power increases: a kind of animalization of man through the most sophisticated political technique results. (Dreyfus and Rabinow ,138).

Thus within the administrative apparatus of the modern state human beings are seen as productive/ unproductive or docile/disorderly resources.

Both Foucault and Althusser have demonstrated the processes of subjectification or subject formation that modern forms of power generate. Louis Althusser<sup>6</sup> provided us with the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses to show how state power acts to create conforming subjects. He argues that this subject reproduces social order so that the power structure is maintained. A subjective consciousness is constructed through

the processes of socialization and interpellation. These processes produce subjects who conform to the accepted standards of the ‘normal’. Applying the concept of ISAs to nationalism, Leva Zake declares, “In nationalism, individuals are interpellated through a complex ideological mechanism in which they come to believe that they are truly liberated and autonomous if they identify with particular national subjectivity” (224)<sup>7</sup>. However, if the “particular national subjectivity” is appropriated by certain religious-nationalist ideologies so that it excludes certain identities, it becomes a problematic situation for the subject of the nation.

In this paper I would like to use the primary inferences drawn by Foucault in order to examine how certain voices are portrayed and how these portrayals become representative of the modern state and its disciplinary control of its citizens. I have discussed the ideas and inferences of Foucault in order to elucidate why the state acts as a disciplinary power. The genealogy of the modern nation-state clearly show this. Here I attempt to discuss how this power is exercised is through the specific instances of the novel.

The exploration of identity as problematic and a sort of non-identity as preferable is offered through the tale of Sohail Tambawala. The predicament of a name, and the identity that it guarantees and stamps on the individual is explored in the course of the novel in a greater way, through the incidents that follow the death of a terrorist in a police encounter. When the death of a terrorist named Sohail Tambawala is reported on television, it results in a unforeseen crisis of identity among three namesakes. We encounter three voices in the novel that belong to three different persons who are represented simply as “Sohail Tambawala, 57,” “Sohail Tambawala, 13,” and “Sohail Tambawala, 20,” respectively. The contrasting depictions capture the different forms of crisis. The first voice is simply there, without any background, without any other aspect of identity, apart from the name. It reflects, “The death of a namesake is startling, like fate urging one to take note of a life, and death, that could have been one’s own. And while one is incapable of empathy for anybody, leave alone anti-nationals, one finds oneself, in spite of oneself, reciting Surah Fatiyah for what could have been the soul of oneself” (122). He, by his own admission, has no sympathy with an ‘anti-national’, which reveals his faith in the idea of the nation. What strikes us though, is that he refers to himself in the third person. Perhaps, we may argue, this is a result of being continuously objectified in a nationalist discourse that portrays him as the ‘other’.

The second voice, of a boy of thirteen, who has already experienced the difficult and mean aspects of life, finds his dream of overcoming his difficulties being famous some day realised through the name continuously appearing in the news media: “I found my name on page 2. Sohail Tambawala. He was dead as I am barely alive. A half living

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terrorist waiter runaway small-town boy with tears in his eyes and bullets in his stomach. He, I, me, we – we were in the papers. *You're famous*, I whispered, striking a karate-chop pose on the rat-infested landing" (123). Bereft of any 'national' sentiment, such as in the former voice, he finds a sort of satisfaction, a sort of release from the daily ignominy.

The third voice is the soliloquy of a twenty years old aspiring barrister who fears an end to his dreams of a successful career in law: "Today it is a terrorist. Tomorrow it will be some enemy country's dictator. In the future, when a 'Sohail-dada' makes headlines, where will I hide my barrister face?" (126). He tries to imagine himself in a Hindu name, even tries his hand at practicing a new signature, to escape from the "shame" of sharing a name with a terrorist. It may be argued that it is really an urge to suppress the 'otherness' being thrust upon him, that drives him to dwell upon changing his name. From their depiction in the text, which does not provide any detail as to their individual backgrounds, it appears that they are as much 'history-less' as the terrorist, so that, it may be proposed, a non-identity describes them better than an identity. A nationalist discourse already categorizes the bearer of a Muslim name as an 'outsider', identifying it on the basis of its difference from a Hindu name; sharing the name of a terrorist, perhaps brands them further as 'anti-national elements'. The voices are ridden with a sense of guilt and self-accusation. We may recognize their individual, as well as collective, fear, as a paranoia that controls their subjectivity.

When we attempt to analyse these voices, we find that though none of these voices is that of the terrorist, all of them are terrified of their names and their religious identity as Muslims. Why does this happen? The answer may be located in Foucault's ideas about the modern state and its technologies of discipline. The state uses its disciplinary power to create docile bodies. The technologies of surveillance and the institution of the police is used to detect and punish the criminal. The terrorist is a criminal of prime importance because, he is not doing crime for personal advantage, but his crime is directed against the almighty state itself. The terrorist wants to destabilise the state. Moreover he is neither a docile body, nor a productive body engaged in enhancing the production of the state. So the state employs its institutional mechanisms to detect and punish terrorists. The problem is that the state in turn uses the discourse of crime and terrorism to justify further surveillance. The social sciences compliment the power of the state in researching the psyche of the terrorist and backgrounds of terrorism. According to Foucault the state maintains its control over the citizens through institutions of the police and the law by guaranteeing the protection of the citizens. Thus the state successfully creates and maintains an atmosphere of fear and perpetual control by justifying itself. The terrified and cowering voices represented above represent individuals who feel that their bodies are targeted by the state. These voices

belong to docile and productive individuals. However, the name Sohail Tambawala becomes a synonym for a terrorist, so that the whole discourse of terrorism built by the state and the social sciences turns against them. The invisible force of this discourse is so strong that their self-image is challenged and wounded. Through the accidental fact of their names, they become excluded from the ‘norm’ of citizenship. So political rationality transforms and objectifies human beings. Thus political rationality transforms and objectifies human beings.

## CONCLUSION

I have referred to the influence of Hegelian thought in order to underline that “the nation-state has been rendered as the most canonical form of political organisation and identity in the contemporary world” and that “individual subjectivity is most readily and conveniently spoken through the idiom of citizenship” (Gandhi 105). However, Foucault has demonstrated that “a kind of animalization of man through the most sophisticated political technique” of the state is the outcome. To conclude on a positive note I would refer to the words of Foucault himself:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1983, 216)<sup>8</sup>

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