

Understanding the Notion of Power in Franz Kafka's Short Story "The Vulture"

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Abstract

Power influences the lives of human beings in every aspect. A human being is engulfed in the power structure so badly that sometimes he is not even aware the way power is controlling his life. The present paper addresses the nature of power and how it operates at different levels by analyzing Franz Kafka's short story "The Vulture". It is an attempt to understand both positive and negative aspects of power and how it controls the lives of people using mind as an important source to change and control their lives. The paper traces power in the shape of vulture controlling the man and making him a victim in the story.

Keywords- Franz Kafka, Mind, Power, Vulture

Power is an inevitable feature of human social life which dominates every aspect of human nature in different manner and is omnipresent in different forms which operates at the most micro levels of social relations. It can't be described as a thing but as a relation and we all live in a web of power relations which can be traced at home, work place, state, country etc. Power doesn't only refer to the government; it could be attributed to anything that controls or influences our minds including person, institution and ideas. Sovereign power is

always attributed to one person having the central authority and it involves obedience to law of the central authority. Michel Foucault formulates a different understanding of power saying that power is everywhere and it comes from everywhere. Foucault alters his idea from sovereign power to disciplinary power and describes discipline as a form of power that tells people how to act by cajoling them to adjust themselves to what is 'normal'. It is power in the form of correct training and it does not strike down the subject towards whom it is directed, in the way that sovereignty does. Discipline works quietly, with special care, in order to produce obedient and subversive people and Foucault categorises them as 'docile bodies'. Classically, power took the form of force or coercion and is considered to be at its purest in acts of physical violence. Discipline acts otherwise and gets a hold of masses differently. It does not seize our bodies to destroy them. Discipline rather trains them, drills them as Foucault says 'normalises' them.

Power has both negative and positive aspects; most of the times power is asserted as negative in the form of domination but it can also be positive in the form of capacity which seemingly acts for change. In negative terms power could be described as 'power over' where power is used to dominate or control others to do something and in positive terms it could be defined as 'power within' where a person realizes his own power and tries to bring a considerable change for something good. Power is likely to be used emerging self and widening the horizon of knowledge in order to bring constructive change instead of gaining control over others.

The fundamental focus of present paper is to relate Franz Kafka's short story "The Vulture" with the concept of power; that how power gains control over the people and makes them defenseless before it. The vulture in this story could be interpreted as the negative form of power which implies dominating system and it tries to take control over man and refers to 'power over' concept as mentioned above and the man in the story could be identified as the

victim of this very power and puppet in the hands of enforced unnecessary rules and regulations without realizing his own power which he possess within himself.

The present story revolves around a vulture and a man. Vultures are known to be large birds which have heavy bodies and are hunched over stance and have relatively weak legs and feet with blunt talons, though they do have powerful bills. They do not hunt for their food instead they feed on carrion. The vulture in the story could be seen as a symbol for power trying to feed on the man to satiate its appetite. Likewise a powerful person is big as well as strong and overpowers the common people and put a halt on their reasoning and thinking ability and it satisfies their quest for power. As the vultures feed on dead bodies similarly power feeds on living dead that are not physically dead but they do not have the ability to question the wrong doings of the people who are at the zenith of hierarchal order. Their very existence is normalized in such a way that they keep on going in their lives without putting a question mark and they accept things as they come. Although, they are a part of society but still they lead an alienated life because they are partially unknown to the reality and don't even bother to know the entire truth. They are trained to behave in that manner by the disciplinary power. The present scenario is molded in such a way that human beings keep on struggling like Sisyphus and rolling the boulder as Camus indicates in his essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus'. In reality this boulder symbolizes life of man where they dwell on doing the things and do not get any meaningful output. A powerful person always seeks more power and it becomes easy to control such people because they will not question the person in authority as they don't recognize the changes happening in the society. Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* describing the shift from sovereign to disciplinary power says that "the disciplines became general formulas of domination" (Foucault137) where "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it."(Foucault138). Mind is used as tool to gain power as George Orwell says in his well renowned work *1984*, 'Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them

together again in new shapes of your own choosing' (Orwell 266, 267). To be in power means to influence and manipulate the thinking of ordinary people in such a way that they see the world through the lenses of the powerful and authoritative minds. The novel *1984* highlights that how a party rules over the people of Oceania by subverting their thinking to such an extent that Winston, the protagonist of the novel feels dubious of himself while recalling a memory of the past. The novel shows that how dangerous power could become by having control over the minds of people of the whole country. The citizens of Oceania lives under the constant vigilance of an anonymous party. Their every single action is monitored and even their thoughts are judged to ensure that nobody is conspiring against the party. The party gets successful in tearing the human minds into pieces in overt and covert ways that the innocent masses of the country are never able to identify this hidden supervision of powerful authorities over them. Their memories are permanently distorted by using memory holes where the evidence against the party is destroyed and new information is generated in order to fulfill the demands and requirements of the party being fully established. The novel shows that how the mind is an important source for the powerful people to acquire sufficient power to maintain their positions using the means of correct training and creating obedient people. According to Foucault 'docile bodies' are created by using the means of correct training which include hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the examination. Disciplinary power operates by a calculated gaze and ends up creating a homogenous society because everyone is compared to the same standard. The Examination unites the processes of observation and normalization where an individual is looked at and analysed. In the story the man is under the observation of vulture and normalization turns him into a perfect 'docile body'.

Though vultures are strong birds having a strong, hooked beak to help them tear open carcasses but they lack powerful feet symbolizing that the power also need a strong mouth to tear the minds of masses without using any physical force. Words contain power to create a

whole new world, destroying the existing system and it is used as an important tool or source by the powerful person to maintain his position. A web of words is woven in a tactful manner that the target itself gets struck in that web without any use of physical force. One of its examples could be the work *Animal Farm* by George Orwell where words play an important role in making Napoleon the master of Animal Farm. Squealer, a pig, serves as second in command to Napoleon, being an effective and convincing orator addresses the animals of the farm using words in such an effective manner that all the animals in the farm were ought to believe it. As the proclamation- ‘All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others’ (Orwell 78) – shows that how manipulative words could be used to justify the selfish deeds of the person possessing power.

The story commences with a vulture tearing the feet of a man; it is strange to find a vulture trying to feed on a living being which is usually not a part of its behavior. Then why here a vulture is behaving in an inappropriate manner? The answer to this question could be understood in terms of power as vulture itself symbolizes this concept, is feeding on the living man who is mentally and emotionally dead. Rene Descartes says in his book *A Discourse on Method* ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ which means ‘I think; therefore I am’ (Descartes 46). As this quote asserts that the ability of thinking makes the existence of human beings relevant otherwise it is likely to be impossible to distinguish between human being and an animal. Thinking is not just about shoveling thoughts in the barn of one’s mind but it also consists of understanding and interpreting the situations and problems in order to find a suitable solution. The man in the story is not using his reasoning ability to find a way for defending himself rather he is standing stiffly and suffering the pain without committing any crime. In our society such people could be found everywhere and they work till dawn to dusk mechanically. Today people are living in a technological and media suffused environment, marked by access to an abundance of advanced technology and smart phones which has made their life convenient and comfortable and turning them into the servants of technology. Now

a person is glued to the phone screen and continuously intakes the information without even questioning the illogical things. A person who doesn't think is dangerous because he would believe whatever is told without even questioning it. The portrayal of sheep in the *Animal Farm* perfectly shows that how power uses such people for its own benefit. The sheep represent the part of society that allows others to manipulate them who do not know what they are supporting but do it anyway. In the novel, the sheep believe on the various speeches that Napoleon gives without questioning. He decides to use them to have a stronger voice that drowns out any opposing thoughts or criticisms. Sheep is the accurate depiction of the dangers of crowd thinking, blind following and misplaced trust and 'Sheep-like' people in the society are dangerous not only for themselves but also for the society because they follow blindly without questioning power. Life without thinking traps a person inside a daily routine where he works like a machine that makes it dangerous because it not only makes him a living dead with no dreams but it also stops his growth making him more vulnerable before power.

The vulture constantly hacks away, flies around the man a few times and then returns to its task. The vulture doesn't kill the man in a single attack instead kills gradually that also exemplifies how power keeps on gnawing at human beings in society slowly instead of striking in single shot it takes time to get hold of the minds of people by observing and keeping a calculated gaze over them. The change in the mindset of people is brought slowly that they don't recognize the change taking place in their personality, the new ideas formed by the power slowly become the part of their individuality as they start treating it as "normal".

In the story, another person who Kafka introduces as gentleman randomly passing by, observes the scene and asks the man the reason for standing there immobile and suffering with pain. The man says that he is defenseless. It came and started tearing away, so obviously he wanted to drive it off, and he even tried to throttle it, but such an animal has tremendous strength; it even wanted to go for his face, so he offered up his feet instead. Here the question

arises, was the man really defenseless before the vulture? Same it lies with the concept of power. Does a person really become defenseless before power? When there is excess of power people always resist against power. The man tries to free himself from the vulture but when the other man passes he sees that the man is just standing there without making any efforts to protect himself. His action could be interpreted in two ways. Either he tried to protect himself but assuming the vulture as a strong bird gave up all his efforts and voluntarily surrendered himself by offering his feet. On the other hand, at first he fought back but lacked the strength to get rid of the vulture, instead he offered his feet in the hope of getting help from somebody. The man says that the vulture was trying to attack on his face but he offered his feet in order to protect his identity without realizing that once the vulture starts eating his feet it will eventually eat him up entirely. His offering shows that he didn't even think about the consequences of his action before taking this decision. Here, it shows that a person becomes utterly helpless and loses his/her mind when he/she encounters such unfortunate incident. He tried to find a quick solution to save his face or identity without realizing that the vulture will at last attack his face also and then there will be no face left to protect. Most of the times a person tries to avoid the problem instead of facing it and finds quick and easy solution instead of seeking a permanent one. The way he acted shows that he himself allowed the vulture to overpower him as he calls himself defenseless. The people give up their power by thinking that they don't have any. The man in the story acts in similar manner where he gave up his power by thinking himself to be helpless before the vulture and making the vulture more powerful as Alice Walker says "Nobody is as powerful as we make them out to be."(Walker 202). It is the people who allow the powerful person to overpower them.

When the gentleman in the story provides a solution to the problem the man asks for his help. The gentleman agrees to help him and goes to bring a gun to shoot the vulture. The vulture listens to their conversation and it seems that it understood all the conversation. Here

the vulture resembles the Big Brother of George Orwell's 1984- 'The Big Brother is watching you' (Orwell 2). When the vulture realizes the danger hovering over its existence, it decides to kill the man. Without giving any time to the man to understand the situation the vulture flies up, gains momentum and then like a javelin thrower thrusts its beak deep into the man through his mouth. In the beginning of the story the vulture takes time to tear his feet but when it senses the danger to its own life, the vulture wastes no time in killing the man. Power always keeps an eye over the people to get information about their each and every action so that any act of opposition is suppressed before it takes the shape of revolt. Whenever the power sees danger coming in its way, it tries to clear the path. The vulture attacks the man in the mouth because every revolt starts by raising voice against wrong doings. Likewise power also tries to suppress voice which is raised against it by using any life-threatening means. Power is all the more cunning because its basic forms can change in response to our efforts to free ourselves from its grip. A person in power can't tolerate opposition so he does every possible thing to stop it including violence and riots.

In the end of the story the vulture also dies by drowning helplessly in the blood of the man. At first the man was helpless before the vulture but in the end the vulture dies helplessly. As it is said that every action has its consequences whether it is good or bad same as in the present story also vulture had to pay a heavy price by losing its life. It also signifies the natural circle that everything which is born, will come to an end eventually. Although it was the decision of the vulture but it became the reason of its decay. The wrong decisions of a powerful person also become reason for his own downfall.

This story helps to understand different aspects of power and how it works to gain control over people using the elements of Disciplinary Power. The behavior of man shows that how a person behaves before power and himself gave up his own power. The real power is in the mind, a person can use mind to control or dominate others and with the same mind one can save oneself from becoming a victim of power. The important thing is that one

should always be careful while receiving new information and ideas. The main purpose of mind is to think and one should always think critically about the power and question it. Instead of waiting for another source to come and help one should make oneself so powerful that he doesn't need to rely on others.

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