

**Jalal Al-Ahmad's *The School Principal* through Michel Foucault's
Discourse and Power Theory: A Cultural Critique**

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Abstract

The discourse of power is one of Michel Foucault's central concepts. This paper seeks to answer the important question whether Foucault's approach to the discourse of power can be traced in Al-Ahmad's novel *The School Principal* and, consequently, offer an analysis of the cultural condition of Iran in the Pahlavi era based on this discourse. Foucault's views on the discourse of power and the technology of discipline are comparable to many parts of the novel and, on a real and objective level, to the cultural and political conditions of Iranian society during the reign of Pahlavi II. In the novel, we are faced with two types of discourse: a discourse of power and a discourse of anti-power. Driven by idealism, the school principal begins to struggle against the discursive order emanating from power (cultural and educational conditions) but eventually disappointed and frustrated, he submits his resignation from his position at the school. Like other state institutions, the school, as a disciplinary institution, makes the dominance of power to be interiorized in individuals within a society which is in transition from traditional culture and tyrannical feudalism to capitalism. The Westoxication discourse is at the same time supported by the ruling power.

Keywords: Cultural Criticism, Michel Foucault, Power Discourse, Jalal Al-Ahmad, *The School Principal*.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Literature is a kind of discourse and signs of cultural structures and discourses of human societies can be found in literary texts, like other texts. Literature is a quite rich source for understanding culture and the complexity of its mechanisms (Payandeh, 1388: 142). From the point of view of cultural critique, literary texts are like cultural products that provide information on the interaction between discourses and the social meanings of the time and place of the texts (Tysen, 1387: 475). In fact, the literary text displays the circulating discourse at the time of writing, and the discourse itself is a social language that has created certain cultural conditions at a specific time and place and represents a form of understanding of human experience. For example, intellectual discourse in the 1930's to the 1950's in Iranian society illustrates the prevalence of the Westernization discourse on a segment of the Iranian intellectual community.

Cultural critique considers literary texts to be inseparable from their historical contexts. Of course, the role of the author is not entirely overlooked, but this role is only partly controlled by him, and is largely determined by historical conditions. The historical moment of the creation of the text is based on a much broader cultural, political, social and economic system. "The text is in fact a verbal structure that is bound to time and space that deals with discourse and ideology" (Bertens, 2003: 228). The purpose of cultural critique is to disclose the impact of cultural products, including literature, on the formation of the identity of a modern society. So in such a critique, ideology is a fundamental concept. Culture is an ideological conflict or hegemony, inasmuch as different and contradictory meanings can be attributed to cultural texts (Payandeh, 1390: 353).

The main objective of this paper is to study the role of power discourse in shaping the socio-cultural behaviors of the characters of Jalal Al-Ahmad's novel *The School Principal*. The most important question in this study is: following Michel Foucault's approach to power theory and discourse, what changes in contemporary sociological and

cultural conditions can be seen in the novel? To what extent can Foucault's approach be adapted to this novel?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article is based on Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse. Foucault holds that "discourses are never empty of power relations, and the issuance of guidelines, rules, regulations, and regulations in moral debates indicates the domination and exercise of power in this area" (MacDonald, 2011: 39). According to Foucault, a discourse is not only related to what can be said or thought, but it is also about who, at what time, with what degree of authority can speak. "Each discourse is based on a specific form of wisdom, so it takes its foundations to give the world a special look."

3. Methodology

In the present article, *The School Principal* has been read and analyzed through a descriptive-analytical method with an interdisciplinary approach based on cultural critique and Foucault's theories in the field of power and discourse.

4. Findings and Discussion

This article analyzes Jalal Al-Ahmad's *The School Principal* in the perspective of cultural critique. It is with special attention to the political and cultural structures of Iranian society that Al-Ahmad creates *The School Principal*. The school is a symbol for the whole community and culture, and the actors in this field behave according to the dominant discourse of society.

5. Conclusion

In *The School Principal*, we have two discourses: a discourse of power and a discourse of anti-power. The principal, with an idealistic mentality stands against the discursive discipline of power (cultural and educational conditions), but in the end submits his resignation from the management of the school (society and culture). Like other state institutions, the school, as a disciplinary institution, institutionalizes power domination in the society, a society that is in transition from a

feudal culture to a capitalistic one, in which the discourse of Westernization is advocated by the ruling state power.

Keywords: Cultural Criticism, Michel Foucault, Power Discourse, Jalal Al-Ahmad, *The School Principal*.

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