

**Problematizing Author. Dialectical Analysis of Michel Foucault’s Essay “*What is an Author?*” and Roland Barthes Essay “*Death of the Author*”**

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**Abstract**

Notion of author and the relationship between the text and the author had been subjected to serious academic arguments in the field of critical theory. Barthes essay “Death of the Author” and that of Foucault’s are considered to be the seminal works that problematized the notion of author from a post structuralist standpoint. It is considered that “What is an Author?” is a counter argument against Barthes essay “Death of the Author”. But from the outset to almost the middle of the essay we can see some ideas of Foucault overlapping with Barthes’ idea, to be followed by Foucault reinforcing the significance of author. The paper navigates through the above stated essays to bring about a dialectical analysis of the ideas presented by Barthes and Foucault with regard to their poststructuralist views on the notion of author.

**Keywords:** author, author function, transdiscursive authors, founders of discursivity

**Introduction**

“*What is an Author?*” is a lecture on literary theory given by Foucault at the College de France on 22 February 1969. The essay is considered as a counter argument against Barthes essay “Death of the Author” written in 1967 in which he criticizes the practice of bringing in the biographical and authorial elements in evaluating a literary work. But for Foucault, the phrase “Death of the Author” is just an empty statement and he tries to redefine author in contemporary milieu and also tries to bring out the relationship between author and his work.

It is interesting to note that both the writers -- Foucault and Barthes-- belong to the same school of post-structuralism which deconstructs the notion of authorial control and dominance which eventually led to the possibility of equivocal readings or multiple interpretations of a single text. While Barthes establishes that the notion of author is no more significant, Foucault believes that the author is still an inseparable part of discourses and he goes on to define his famous ideal of ‘author function’.

From the outset to almost the middle of the essay we can see some ideas of Foucault overlapping with what Barthes had stated in his essay “The Death of the Author”. Foucault, in “What is an Author?” states that “The coming into the being of the notion of “author” constitutes

the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and sciences” (Foucault 205), which is in tandem with Barthes idea that “The author is a modern figure ... emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'” (Barthes 142-143). Both the writers acknowledge that fact that rise of ‘author’ was a moment of recognition and triumph of our individuality clamped down by the religious overpowering of Middle Ages. But unlike Barthes, who believed that the author is an insignificant entity in the process of signification of a text, Foucault intends to bring out the relationship between the text, author, and the society.

Barthes began his essay by quoting from Balzac’s novel *Sarrazine*” to set a premise for the essay that points out the indistinguishability associated with the voices present in a text – is it of author’s, character’s or just a general truth . In similar fashion, Foucault quotes a line from one of Samuel Beckett’s works which is as follows. “‘What does it matter who is speaking’, someone said, ‘*what does it matter who is speaking*’” (Foucault 205). Whoever be the speaker of these lines, it conveys a sense of indifference of the unknown speaker to the reader. Foucault says that this indifference is not a character trait but a general trend or condition that has taken over modern literature. In Foucault’s own words it is an:

immanent rule, taken up over and over again, never fully applied, not designating writing as something completed, but dominating it as a practice. Since it is too familiar to require a lengthy analysis, this im-manent rule can be adequately illustrated here by tracing two of its major themes. (Foucault 206)

First theme is the end of expressionism and emergence of self-reflexivity in writing. This is associated with the idea of poststructuralism. Today we write not to express our interiority but rather writing is simply identified with ‘its own unfolded exteriority’. For example if we compare a romantic poetry and that of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* we can see that the writer’s subjectivity is absent in the latter work. In modern day, writing techniques like meta-fiction is more focused upon structure or form of writing rather than writers’ interiority.

The second theme with which we can trace the immanent rule of indifference is the association of writer with notion of death. In old traditions, like in Greek epics, writers intended to perpetuate the immortality of hero. But writers like Kafka, Proust, and Flaubert killed their own subjects/characters. This could be Foucault metaphorically suggesting that modern writer/author killed even the slightest traces of his/her subjectivity from their works.

Again, this is the idea expressed by Barthes when he said that the author diminishes “like a tiny figure at the end of the literary stage” (Barthes 145). The writer alienates himself from what he writes.

Foucault says that writer has started to “assume the role of a dead man” (Foucault 207) in the game of writing. Critics have took note of it but failed to study the significance or effect of this disappearance. This disappearance of the author remained unnoticed due to two notions/ideas. That is the idea of work (oeuvre) and writing (écriture). Giving emphasis on writing (écriture), Foucault says, “transposes the empirical characteristics of an author into transcendental anonymity” (Foucault 208). And the text, just like Bible receives umpteen interpretation and the author gets venerated into the status of god. Thus whatever the critics did to circumvent the importance of author actually helped in maintaining author’s privilege and

authority.

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers. (Foucault 209)

It is from this point Foucault's contestation against Barthes' idea begins.

Before getting into the formulation of his idea of author function, Foucault stresses on the importance of the author's name. He says that author name is just not a proper name or a designation or a signifier that denotes a historical or contemporary individual. Author name, to certain extent, is equivalent to description. Hence if we are to consider the author name as the bob of a pendulum, it keeps on oscillating between the poles of description and designation. He says that the name of the author is neither inside or outside but remains at the contours of the text. It is not simply an element in a discourse. It performs a classificatory function that differentiates one text from the other. Author name characterises certain mode of discourse like Kafkaesque, Marxian, Kantian et cetera. Foucault says that not all discourses have author function just like a letter that will never have an author but only a signer. Thus, he defines author function as the "characteristic of mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 211). Whichever text that possesses the author function will have the following four characteristics.

First characteristic according to Foucault is that, discourses endowed with author function will be a part of the legal system. A writer has to own his work so that he could be punished if he violates the norms and dictates of the authority. Second, author function is not constant and universal. Author function does not affect all discourses in a universal and constant way. Foucault brings in instances from the Middle Ages to prove this premise. During the Middle Ages scientific writings were not accepted or considered valid without the name of the author or knowledge of the proponent. At the same time it was normal to valorise a literary work without knowing who wrote it which is evident by the way the epic *Beowulf* survived despite its anonymous authorship. But this practice started to change in a diametrically opposite way by 17<sup>th</sup> century. In scientific discourses author's name has no much significance than just to name a scientific theorem while anonymous literary writing came to be disregarded and never considered to be a part of any discourses.

Third, author function is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer but, rather, by series of specific and complex operations. Here, Foucault argues that author is a construct, a construct by the critics. Critics take into consideration the creative faculties like motive, style, design in which the writing originates to give an author a realistic status. Foucault opines that criteria used by modern critics to construct an author is similar to Saint Jerome's criteria in attributing authorship to anonymous religious text.

According to Saint Jerome, there are four criteria: the texts that must be eliminated from the list of works attributed to a single author are those inferior to the others (thus, the author is defined as a standard level of quality); those whose ideas conflict with the doctrine expressed in the others (here the author is defined as a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence); those written in a different style and containing words and phrases not ordinarily found in the

other works (the author is seen as a stylistic uniformity); and those referring to events or historical figures subsequent to the death of the author (the author is thus a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge). (Foucault 214)

Fourth, all discourses with author function will possess plurality of self. To state it more simply, a character in the novel need not be the author himself. It can be his alter ego or other distant self of a single persona. Just like the way Barthes pointed out the indistinguishability of plurality of voices in a fiction narrative Foucault says that it is hard pin down the author's persona into a single self that itself multiplies the possibility of interpretation of a text.

Now, Foucault believes that he limited the notion of a text as someone who produces a piece of work and to whom legitimacy of a text can be attributed. He says that an author is much more than a book. He then classifies author into two types – 'trans discursive' authors and authors who are 'founders of discursivity'. Trans discursive authors are authors of a theory or a discipline or a tradition, Aristotle, Homer, Hippocrates for instance. Next category, that is 'founders of discursivity', are authors who are not just the authors of their own text but opened up countless possibility of other texts and discourse. Marx and Freud, according to Foucault, are 'founders of discursivity'. "They also created possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they found" (Foucault 218).

Foucault concludes the essay by reiterating his arguments as to why he still attach importance to author function and refute some of the ideas of Barthes in *Death of the Author*". Author function makes possible a typology of discourse, thus helping in distinguishing one discourse from another. He also says that a discourse should not only be analysed according to its expressive value but also by mode of its existence – by analysing the cultural factors like circulation, publication, advertisement etc. Author function can also keep a watch on the dangerous proliferation of meaning which otherwise would end up in a never-ending loop of signification as Foucault values the intend of the author in a particular text. After all these arguments Foucault ends the essay by saying that, in this rapidly changing society he is nobody to guarantee that author function would remain constant for ever. He says that a time would come where an author is no more significant. But there would be another means by which a text or a discourse will be contained or a force that controls the proliferation of meanings. He says: I think that, as the society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such manner that fiction and its polysemous text will function according to another mode, but still within a system of constraint – one that will not be the author but will have to be determined or, perhaps experienced... (Foucault 222)

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