

POWER, DISCOURSE, AND INSTITUTIONS FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF ANTONOMY IN WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?

Mert CENGİZ¹

ABSTRACT

This article is based on Brian Clark's *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1980) and examines the play within the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault. By focusing on Foucault's concepts of power, discourse, and institutions, this study aims to explain how the play both reflects and questions social norms regarding individual autonomy. By analysing in detail, the characters' struggles within institutional structures and the impact of these institutions on their identities, it aims to highlight the complex tension between a person's sense of self and their existence under the dominant influence of institutions. The analysis offers insights into the profound effects of Foucault's theoretical work on the relationship between individuals and institutions in the play. At the center of the analysis are the institutional forces that shape and restrict the lives of the characters and the struggles of individuals against this power. By examining these struggles in detail, it is aimed to understand how these power relations within institutional structures affect the autonomy, stories, and choices of the characters. Foucault's theoretical foundations, especially his views on disciplinary mechanisms within institutions and the bodies of people under authority, shed light on the work done in this field.

Keywords: *Foucault, Whose Life Is It Anyway?, Institutional power, Individual agency, Discourse, Resistance*

¹ Istanbul Aydin University, English Language and Literature, ORCID: 0009-0001-1343-5391

ÖZ

Bu makale, Brian Clark'ın *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1980) oyununu Michel Foucault'un teorik çerçevesi içinde örneklendirerek incelemektedir. Foucault'un güç, söylem ve kurumlarla ilgili kavramlarına odaklanarak, bu çalışma oyunun bireysel özerklikle ilgili toplumsal normları hem yansıttığını hem de sorguladığını açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Karakterlerin kurumsal yapılar içindeki mücadelelerini ve bu kurumların kimlikleri üzerindeki etkisini detaylı bir şekilde analiz ederek, kişinin öz benlik duygusu ile kurumların baskın etkisi altında kalan varlıklarının arasındaki karmaşık gerilimi vurgulamayı hedeflemektedir. Analiz, Foucault'un teorik çalışmalarının oyundaki birey ve kurumlar arasındaki ilişki üzerindeki derinlemesine etkilerine dair içgörüler sunmaktadır. İncelemenin merkezinde, karakterlerin yaşamlarını şekillendiren ve kısıtlayan kurumsal güçlerle bireylerin bu güce karşı yaptıkları mücadeleler bulunmaktadır. Bu mücadeleleri detaylı bir şekilde inceleyerek, kurumsal yapılar içindeki bu güç ilişkilerinin karakterlerin özerkliği, hikayeleri ve tercihleri üzerinde nasıl etkili olduğunu anlamak amaçlanmıştır. Foucault'nun teorik temelleri, özellikle kurumlar içinde disiplin mekanizmaları ve otorite altında olan insanların bedenleri konusundaki görüşleri, bu alanda yapılan çalışma üzerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Foucault, Whose Life Is It Anyway?, Kurumsal güç, Bireysel ajans, Söylem, Direniş*

INTRODUCTION

Within the debatable structure of literature, the theme of exploring the complex context between individual autonomy and the dominant influence of institutions stands out as a profound theme. This article shows how the two act play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* written by Brian Clark gives the power dynamics of institutions and how this discourse of power shown in literature and takes its place as a criticism of power dynamics and institutions. Published in 1978, this play reflects the multifaceted dynamics of power, discourse, and institutional influence on an individual's body.

At the centre of the play, we have the main character Ken Harrison, a talented sculptor whose four limbs are paralyzed after a car accident. This character is a bedridden character with no hope of recovery and he wants to go outside from hospital, and wants to die. The play generally takes place in a hospital. As the play progresses, the hospital, which is a seemingly sterile environment where people pin their hopes and seek help, turns into a battlefield of deep existential questions under the effect of institutional power. Ken struggles to cope not only with the physical limitations imposed on him by his condition but also with the dilemmas arising from his desire to maintain control of his own life, causing an internal conflict in the character.

The core of the conflict stems from Ken's insistence on determining the course of his medical treatment, that is, his assertion that he should have the right to say something about his life, including the right to refuse life-sustaining treatments of doctors. This situation leads the reader into deep reflections on the ethical implications of individual freedom, the right to die, and the role of institutions in shaping the individual. The hospital as an institution becomes a stage for the exploration of social norms and medical ethics and profound ethical dilemmas therefore Foucault's theories on power, discourse, and institutions provide an illuminating framework for the analysis of the play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* His conceptual apparatus, particularly his ideas about disciplinary mechanisms, becomes a lens and also a key for understanding the complex power dynamics in the play within the institutional walls of the hospital.

In delving into this research, the article aims not only to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in the main character's struggle, but also to contribute to a broader understanding of the intersection of individual agency and corporate influence. By contextualizing Foucault's theoretical foundations within the

thematic narrative of the play, the profound effects of these dynamics on literature are illuminated. It is aimed to examine to what extent individuals change under pressure and turn into “docile bodies”.

HOSPITAL AND LEGAL SYSTEM AS INSTITUTIONS IN THE WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY? ACCORDING TO FOUCAULT

The analysis of this play will be based on Foucault’s theories. In this context, it is possible to examine the play through issues such as power, discipline, and the effects of institutions on the individual since it clearly shows the impact of the institutions and the authority figures representing these institutions on the individual.

Power dynamics and power relations are phenomena that directly affect an individual’s life and identity formation. When we look at the details of this element of power, we see that power is given to us through some characters or institutions in the play. In this case, it is possible to see this power and the representatives of these power elements everywhere and in every field. In this regard, Foucault’s theories enlighten our way and appear as a solid basis for the analyses to be made. Michael Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* implies that power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1977). He argues that power is not centralized in a single entity or institution. It is not only in the hands of governments or authorities, but this power is dispersed throughout the society we live in. Power operates at multiple levels and emanates from a variety of sources, so everyone who works within an institution becomes the embodiment of that power because this power undeniably ends with the dominance of the powerful over those who are not powerful.

The first institution we encounter in this play is the Hospital. Almost the entire scenes of act one and act two take place in this institution. People who are working in the hospital behave in a way that shows the impact of this institution on the individual. If we look at the characters of Sister Andersen and Nurse Kay Sadler, who follow the orders of the doctors in the play, they are the last step that implements the concept of power. In the examination of the power dynamics between Dr Emerson and Dr Scott, it is seen that Dr Emerson is more experienced and senior. He mentions that he has nearly thirty years of experience, but the same cannot be said for Dr Scott. The topic discussed between two doctors in the first act of the play is their discussion about the medicine called Valium to be given to the

main character, Ken, who represents individuality and the affected body under authority in the play. This medicine is a sedative injection. While Dr Scott, with his knowledge, said that the Valium should be given in 1 dose, at this point, Dr Emerson anchored his idea in the power dynamic using his knowledge and conveyed it using his experiences. At this point, the practitioners of this power acted in line with the information and applied this power state to the patient's body. The medicine called Valium is presented as a representation and metaphor of power. At this juncture, although Dr Emerson was the executor of this power, no one tried to stop him. If we think of the hospital as a society, the medication given has now been accepted as a social norm and the necessity of its application has been considered and accepted by other people in the hospital.

Power dynamics and the effect of health institution are criticized in the debate between two doctors and this debate is about the medicine Valium. We do not see these power dynamics among other hospital employees because they are only reflecting the ideology of the authority and what authority says but this situation is made more visible by presenting it between two doctors.

Dr Emerson: But in spite of two qualified opinions, you accept the decisions of someone completely unqualified to take it?

Dr Scott: He may be unqualified, but he is the one affected.

Dr Emerson: Ours was an objective, his a subjective decision.

(Clark, 1978, p. 12).

As can be seen in this quote, both doctors approach the issue from different perspectives. This shows that the decision on the human body is made by two doctors and that the patient's wishes and thoughts are not important at all. Dr Scott's opinion is that the patient's body is sensitive, and she argues that the patient's decisions can only belong to him. On the other hand, Dr Emerson approaches this issue from the exact opposite point. He is fonder of power and authority and applies his power in the direction of his own experiences. There is a scene in the play that where we see this desire to exert power over Ken's body.

Ken: Don't stick that fucking thing in me.

Dr Emerson: (injecting the syringe) There – it's over now.

Ken: Doctor, I didn't give you permission to stick that needle in me. Why did you do it? (Clark, 1978, pp. 13-14)

Here, the dominance of power on the individual is seen inside of the health institution. If we interpret this situation, it is very compatible with Foucault's concept of "docile bodies". In this concept, Foucault talks about how bodies are under the influence and pressure of institutions and how they become obedient bodies. After the injection, Ken accepts the situation, and he never talks about it later in the play. "The human body was entering a machinery power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (Foucault, p. 138). This situation, which Michel Foucault mentioned in his book *Discipline and Punish*, provides the analysis of the injection event that took place in this play's first act. The hospital explores the body, breaks it down with medicine and rearranges the body. To understand what kind of institution the hospital is and its effect on the patients, it needs to be examined in detail. At this point, Francesco Guala sheds light on this issue. Francesco Guala, in his book *Understanding institutions: The science and philosophy of living together* (2016), emphasizes the effects of institutions and institutional identities. "According to externalism, the identity of an institution and the meaning of institutional terms is determined by the operative, not by the manifest concept. If we want to know what an institution is, we must study people's practices, not their folk theories" (Guala, 2016, p. 180). When Dr Emerson's actions are examined based on Guala's statement, we see what the hospital institution actually is or how it acts, and this situation clearly shows us that this institution dominates the individual. In this context, we see Dr Emerson in an operative role, and our individual character, Ken, has to do what this operative figure says. Dr Emerson, who is described as an operative, shows us what kind of institution this institution is.

It is noteworthy that from the beginning to the end of the play, the main character, Ken, wants to die and is in a dilemma between life and death. This situation has raised ethical and moral considerations. About morality, William Ray Arney in his article argues that The exercise of power is even seen as preeminent over the constraints of "morality." In fact, power determines that which is moral according to this play; it does not occur the other way around, as we might think. Ken tells Dr. Scott the registrar, that morally she must accept his decision to die because it is his decision (Arney, 1980, p. 107).

In connection with the quotation given above, Ken states that Dr Scott's moral is better than his and that is because Dr Scott is stronger than him. In this example, it is an undeniable fact that power determines what is moral, and

the individual who remains under the rule of power clearly expresses this. In the second act of the play, medical knowledge and power in the play are clearly shown through Dr Emerson. He has the first and last decision on the patient's health. The structure that decides whether the patient should live is the hospital, that is, the doctors, who hold the power dynamics. His analysis in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault focuses specifically on the dynamics of medical knowledge and power. He implies that "[...] institutions confront the primary and secondary spatializations with forms of a social space whose genesis, structure, and laws are of a different nature. And yet, or, rather, for this very reason, it is the point of origin of the most radical questionings" (Foucault, 2004, p. 31). While Foucault analyses the clinic as an institution, he discusses how medical knowledge and power are structured within these institutions. It sheds light on how medical discourse, techniques, and practices are used to establish authority over the patient's body, emotions, and thoughts, and to define what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy condition. It is possible to see examples of this situation in the play. The discourse and language used are very much about establishing power and accumulation of knowledge. Foucault argues that the medical establishment shapes and controls the perception and understanding of disease and health through various mechanisms of power. By examining the historical development of medical institutions and their impact on medical perception, Foucault presents us with the broad systems of knowledge and power that shape individuals' experiences and identities. We see medical knowledge in the play throughout Dr Emerson's speech constantly expresses his experiences and relates to his medical knowledge.

Kershaw: Then how do you distinguish between a medical syndrome, and a sane, even justified, depression.

Dr Emerson: By using my thirty years' experience as a physician, dealing with both types.

Kershaw: No more questions, my Lord. (Clark, act 2, p. 42)

As can be seen from this conversation, the doctor's experience is acceptable and trustworthy to other characters. It is clear to see how medical knowledge and power are implicated within these institutions.

While the play deals with the individual's search for control of his own life, it also presents the complex texture of legal conflicts and institutional interactions. By focusing on the legal elements of the play, this article will also examine the effect of the legal situation on the individual and it is

possible to see how the legal system makes the individual obedient through examples through the play.

The main character in the play, Ken, wants to make his own decisions about ending his life, but on the other hand, he encounters the conflict between the hospital and the legal system, and this causes a dilemma and confusion for the character. Ken's choices regarding his health status were intertwined with legal processes and re-questioned the limits of individual autonomy, which were already blunted and altered in the hospital. The play is a dramatic reflection of the conflict between the legal rights of the individual and the intervention of health and legal institutions. This play not only deals with the individual's legal struggle, but also with how social expectations and legal norms shape the individual's decisions, because the judge who makes decisions following the legal rules is the representation of both the legal institution and the society's expectations and norms. The power of legal institutions not only intervenes in the life of the individual, but also affects the individual's decisions by reflecting the social norms.

As the second institution, we see the Judge, who comes to the hospital as the embodiment of the legal system as an institution and also as the decision mechanism. The issue of what the Judge will listen to the parties and decide creates a different contradiction. Because the issue that needs to be decided is not an issue between a criminal and a complainant, but the decision on the body and soul of Ken, who is at war physically and spiritually. The individuals are expected to decide his or her own life with his or her free will and have a say in his or her right to life and thought of death. At this point, the judge's decision is actually a decision made by the authority. Even if the judge decides to stop the patient's treatment and leave him to die, what should be questioned here is whether the decision-making authority belongs to the judge when looking deeper into the incident. At this point, there is no such thing as defending the individuality of the individual with a fifty percent probability. Because the purpose of the legal system as an institution shown in the play is not to defend the autonomy of the individual, but rather to show the power of authority. Leaving a person to die as a social expectation is the main theme that is frequently questioned in the play. In the second act, Judge says, "I shell, therefore, make an order for him to be set free" (p. 45). With this statement, it is clear that the decision to release a person actually depends on the decision or rules of an authority. The situation in the play it is not about euthanasia. We know that this is considered a

legal crime in some countries. But in this play the decision is stopping the treatment. The author's use of this situation as the main subject is actually criticizing this issue. It is not about a legal crime but it is another decision without saying the name of euthanasia. The author presents this to us by showing different authorities.

In his book Foucault's Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity (1997), John S. Ransom addresses and discusses Foucault's theories about discipline and the politics of subjectivity. In this book, it is also seen that the individual's effort to exist under the influence of institutions is mentioned. "The individual is neither independent of nor wholly defined by social powers but a focal point, a level on which a plurality of forces interacts, struggle, compromise, and end up producing temporary alignments that mark the individual for a period of time" (Ransom, p. 168). What is understood at this point is that when we consider Ken as an individual, we see that many power systems act on this individual.

The judge is actually a character who listens and evaluates different opinions, unlike the doctor's authority, but as a result the decision he makes is the result of the situation he believes or has been led to believe. The judge again reached a conclusion about the patient, who was considered a bedridden and hopeless case. On the one hand, there is a patient struggling to survive under bad conditions, and on the other hand, there are individuals and officials who are not physically affected by this situation. While no one can fully understand Ken's situation, everyone gives their opinion and becomes the decision maker that affect Ken's life and body. The judge's decision in the last scene is the proof that nothing is actually in the hands of the individual. As Foucault claims, our bodies are actually the bodies of authority, not our own. What is meant by authority here is the power that puts pressure and dominates the individual. The end of the play is quite ironic. The judge who made the decision to stop Ken's treatment, said that Ken's hand must be on the bible. But since Ken cannot move his limbs, the judge uses the following expression: "I would like you to take the oath. Dr Scott-- his right hand please" (Clark, p. 43). The fact that Dr Scott, who is morally stronger than Ken, is asked to take Ken's dysfunctional hand and place it on the bible shows the influence and power of the Institution once again and for the last time. Even though it is passive, we see once again how the body is docile.

TENSION BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

The hospital and the legal system, as the institutions at the centre of the play, stand out as two important factors that intervene in Ken Harrison's life. The hospital has an impact on Ken's autonomy through medical intervention and its normative expectations. The legal system, on the other hand, intervenes in Ken's decisions and rights through its legal processes and legal norms. Based on Foucault's theories, the capacity of individuals to resist power relations is frequently emphasized in this play. Ken Harrison's persistent refusal to receive treatment represents resistance on both a legal and institutional level. This resistance helps us to understand what role it plays in the individual's quest for autonomy.

Physical limitations cause Ken to have difficulty performing activities of daily living. However, despite losing his physical freedom, Ken is determined to keep his mind and spirit alive. Also, while coping with the loss of independence, Ken focuses on making his own decisions and directing his life. Even in the midst of social isolation, he communicates with his surroundings using his sense of humour and tries to alleviate the isolation. When he encounters legal struggles, he does not give up defending her rights and tries to fight by focusing on his rights over his own body, even though he has lost control on his body. Ken tries to stand against social expectations and strives to strengthen his own identity. In the process of confronting death, he questions the meaning of life and continues his struggle for life in line with his own values. When we look at it in terms of language and speech, we see that spoken language constantly contains sexual nuances. For example, in the beginning of the first act he says "What do you mean? Have I finished Nurse. I haven't started her yet!" (Clark, p.2). At this point, Ken tries to destroy his physical passivity with the activity of his speech power, but this creates a dilemma for him. He resorts to the sexual joke method as a rebellion against his oppression as a human being under institutions. Because he thinks that if he succeeds in this matter, he will have power at a certain point, because the main thing he is aware of in his speeches is that he is being used both physically and mentally under a power. For this reason, he is very reactive to taking narcotics and calming his mind. Because the only thing he has is the ability to speak. With the injection given by Dr Emerson, he calms down again and has to sleep, and his only weapon is thus taken away from him for a short time. In Michel Foucault's works on sexuality, especially in his book *The History of Sexuality*, he examined the role of sexuality in the social

and cultural context. Foucault argued that sexuality is a subject controlled by society and that this control occurs through language. It emphasizes that sexuality is shaped by the norms and rules of society, and the language used by individuals to express their sexual experiences is affected by these norms. According to Foucault, society regulates sexuality and does this regulation using language as a tool (Foucault, 1990). At this point, if the individual's talk about sexuality originates from and is influenced by social norms, then Ken, the main character, talking on a sexual basis and making jokes sheds light on the fact that he is an individual affected by social norms. In this case, his sexual speech, which we describe as his only weapon, is actually a power effect created by the social institution on him. At this point, Ken is an individual who has lost his individual autonomy in every field and exists completely under the pressure and power of institutions and is trying to disappear from the world.

CONCLUSION

When all the examples and information given are examined from a Foucauldian perspective, the pressure of the hospital and the legal system as an institution on the main character Ken, whom we consider as an individual, is undeniable. At the same time, in the examination of the language spoken by the main character, since the conversations contain sexual references and sexual sense of humour, when we look at this situation from Foucault's perspective, it is seen that the main character speaks this way as a result of the norms conveyed by the society and uses it to create a power dynamic, but since he uses it through the norms of the society, it was obvious that he was influenced by the social institution. In this play written by Brian Clark, it is clearly seen that the individual has been subjected to power systems on the way to becoming an individual, and these power systems have turned bodies into "docile bodies", as Foucault implies in his book *Discipline and Punish*.

In conclusion, Ken thought that he could persuade people or convey his ideas by using his speech, was anesthetized as a result of the injection and was put to sleep. In other words, he has been silenced by a power and adapted to it. It was claimed that he was psychologically ill because he could not make his own decisions, and then the health institution, not satisfied with this issue, applied to the legal system and another institution was involved. Up to this point, his voice has not been listened to and his wishes for discharge have been ignored by the hospital. Although the involvement of the legal system

means that the individual's decision will be evaluated, it does not mean that the individual's autonomy will be ensured. Because the decision to be made will be made by an institution in any way and will not be solely focused on the individual. Likewise, as we see in the last scene, Ken's hand is raised by the doctor and pressed on the Bible, the decision is made by the judge, and while all this is happening, there is no talk of becoming autonomous or creating the individual's own identity from a Foucauldian perspective.

In the *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Garry Gutting implies that "We have seen how Foucault wanted to write books in order to escape from any fixed identity, to continually become someone else, thereby never really being anyone" (Gutting, 2019, p. 9). In the light of this quote, we can say that in the play where everyone has a right to say, when we hear everyone's voice but cannot hear the individual's voice. Only one question comes to our mind. As the author gave this name to the play, whose life is it anyway? This life, now questioned and interpreted, has become the life of the "docile body" and indirectly the life of institutions that reflect power dynamics.

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