

ECHOES OF SILENT ASSENT: A STUDY OF EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE IN TENDER IS THE FLESH BY AGUSTINA BAZTERRICA

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ABSTRACT

An alarming dystopian novel, *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica offers an allegory of biopolitical regime where human beings are commodified and being farmed like animals. In the novel, Bazterrica crafts a predatory capitalist society that embodies systemic violence, neoliberal cannibalism and linguistic sanitization. With her incisive critique, she presents a horrendous world where the consumption of human meat is legalized. Though this novel exaggerates the biopolitical control in to which humans are trapped in neoliberal cannibalism, it reverberates the tension of the society where the commodification of human flesh is rationalized through euphemistic discourse. Additionally, human empathy been eroded by capitalist notion revealing how the body becomes the site of state control and ethical inversion. The discourse in which the cannibalistic act is validated through societal system and linguistic sanitization is discussed through the mechanism of Foucault's discursive control and Gayathri Spivak's epistemic violence.

KEYWORDS: Discursive control, epistemic violence, euphemistic discourse, neoliberal cannibalism.

INTRODUCTION

Through its stark critique, dystopian literature consistently reveals the pressing concerns of the present era. Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender is the Flesh* published in 2017 is one such novel that echoes the current anxieties marked by escalating biopolitical control, dehumanization and commodification. With its incisive critique, it presents a horrendous world where the consumption of human meat is legalized. Though this novel exaggerates the biopolitical control into which humans are trapped in neoliberal cannibalism, it reverberates the tension of the society where the commodification of human flesh is rationalized through euphemistic discourse and human empathy eroded by capitalist notion revealing how the body becomes the site of state control and ethical inversion. In the sense, this dystopian narrative expounds how language is emptied of empathy with the strategic use of euphemism.

Illuminating neoliberal principles, in *Tender Is the Flesh*, brings out how bodies themselves become the ultimate commodity, a grotesque endpoint of capitalist biopolitics. Casting light on Foucault's concept of biopolitics, he expounds the mechanism of the modern state that exercises power over life itself including their health, reproduction and survival. In terms of neoliberalism, life is valued in terms of their economic efficiency. In this sense, human capacities as well as their bodies are disciplined and monetized for profit. As neoliberalism feeds on human vitality, it discards them when they become no longer useful. Spivak's epistemic violence reveals the erasure of marginalized voices as well as how they are stripped of their ability to narrate their own existence. In parallel, neoliberalism devours not only the material resources of marginalized communities but also appropriates and commodifies their epistemic frameworks.

The discourse in which the cannibalistic act is validated through societal system and linguistic sanitization is discussed through the mechanism of Foucault's discursive control and Gayathri Spivak's epistemic violence. The novel further exposes how the state-sanctioned discourses operate, that systematically dehumanize, silence, and commodify marginalized subjects, thereby erasing their humanity. Foucault's concept of discursive practices where knowledge becomes the truth which normalizes cannibalism intersects with Spivak's notion of epistemic violence that renders the silencing of subaltern voices results in the effacement of voices leaving only the hush of forgotten voices. The lingering echoes of unvoiced murmurs haunt every unspoken scream. The methodological lens shaping the analysis of this paper is Foucault' discursive control and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's epistemic violence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Keith M. Booker argues that dystopian literature is deeply political in nature as it sharply critiques the illness of the society. He emphasizes its focus on essential and weightiest questions of human existence such as control, ideology, power, liberty and human condition. Leading to its philosophical enquiries, it functions as both social and cultural critic. Accordingly, dystopian novels become the ideological critique of the present. *Tender is the Flesh* aligns with

this tradition as it addresses issues such as industrial farming, consumerism and bioethics. Existing scholarship on this particular novel has focused on the themes of anthropocentrism and dehumanization (LeForge, Joseph Charles), commentary on spectral tropicality (Vaz Quincó, B. E., & Vasques Vital, A.) and as an environmental and post humanist critique (Sebastian Williams). However, scholarly engagement with the novel often overlooks its potential alignment with Foucauldian discursive frameworks and Spivak's epistemological violence. This study aims to address that gap by analyzing *Tender is the Flesh* with mechanisms of power and the erasure of marginalized representations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foucault's theory on discursive practices draws attention to the understanding of how language and knowledge become an active site where power is exercised. Discourse doesn't merely act as a vehicle of communication rather a mechanism of power that constructs and shapes reality. According to him, discourse has the capacity to legitimize norms and to discipline bodies. Furthermore, it determines what can be said, who can speak and what counts as knowledge. In his work called *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he asserts that subjects are constituted through discourses that operate across institutions, practices and norms. This concept of constructing truth is particularly relevant in Bazterrica's world where humans are bred, slaughtered and consumed as state sanctioned meat. This dystopian novel embodies Foucault's notion of discursive practices showcasing the extremities of commodification and institutional control. It illustrates that the power does not operate through brute force but through the construction of norms, the regulation of language and the production of docile bodies. In essence, this novel becomes a chilling illustration of understanding the mechanisms of language and power through Foucault's ideas.

Spivak's seminal essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988) acts as a sharp critique on Western epistemological framework that tries to silence marginalized women and not allow them within the hegemonic modes of discourse. She uses the term epistemic violence that underscores how the knowledge system particularly colonial, patriarchal or capitalist regimes exclude subaltern people by rendering them unintelligible. According to her, the subaltern cannot speak not because their voices are actively suppressed but they fall outside the framework of what structure deems intelligible. This kind of violence is not overt like forcible oppression rather it is done through the erasure of agency itself. In this novel, it is necessary to situate the commodification of human bodies within the framework of Spivak to understand the erasure of the very possibility of their existence. The humans who are bred in human processing plants called the 'heads' are stripped of their voice, language and agency. Their silence is imposed upon them through all aspects including legal, linguistic and institutional mechanisms. Bazterrica's dystopian world dramatizes such practice in which language actively suppresses the agency of a particular group offering a chilling affirmation of Spivak's premise that "the Subaltern cannot speak." Through the intersection of Foucault's discursive practices and Spivak's epistemic violence, *Tender is the Flesh* can be analysed in terms of how the language becomes a strategic instrument to efface agency allowing only the muted echoes of forgotten voices.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Discursive silencing of moral agency

This novel talks about a dystopic world where animal meat is compromised by viral infection, therefore cannibalism is institutionalized for survival. The cruel system of breeding humans for food, naming those humans as heads and commodifying those subjects for wealth are analysed in order to bring out how discourses erase ethical agency and produce dehumanizing forms of life. When consumption of animal meat is regarded as hazardous, Governments across the globe legalize the breeding of humans for meat. They term it as 'special meat' in order to minimize the cruelty in uttering the real term called human meat.

These words transition and special meat render a sharp critique on state-sanctioned discourse that offers language which obscures violence and normalises what is unfathomable. It also reveals how language can be used as a tool of epistemic control in which reality can be shaped and perceived with the use of euphemism. Here the term, 'transition' which projects how people switch over from conventional animal meat consumption to unconventional human meat consumption flattens the violent practice into a tolerable term, naturalizing the gruesome act of the government. Marcos, the protagonist of this novel who works at a human meat processing plant goes grim about his job and repulses the words the government uses to neutralize the violence. According to Foucault, discourse integrates knowledge systems, societal norms, and the dynamic process by which subjectivity is both imposed and internalized. Within this narrative, the word transition comes under Foucault's discursive machinery that depoliticizes the systemic brutality carried on by the Government that institutionalizes cannibalism.

In Foucault's framework, discourse is not merely a language but a system of structure which delineate the conditions of possibility for speech. Discursive practices regulate what may be articulated, who has the authority to speak and what is recognized as legitimate knowledge. There are many such sanitized words across the story line that hides the

brutality of commodification and enforces silence through discourse. Those terminologies include First Generation pure, special meat, products, heads, merchandise, upper extremity, lower extremity and Spanel's delicacies. These sanitized terminologies that have been circulated in society reflect the function of language as a mechanism of power and control. This kind of euphemistic expression of cruel practices resonates Michel Foucault's idea of discursive practices in which language is constructed and regulated in order to instil power.

These powerful euphemistic expressions tend to naturalize cannibalism as a part and parcel of life. In public discourses, these words have the capacity to desensitize the malicious cannibalistic capitalism. Furthermore, it contributes to the suppression of ethics related to the horror of eating human meat. In doing so, it commodifies human bodies and also silences their subjectivity obscuring them from public consciousness. In the literal rendering, the narrator has described the label and presentation style of Spanel that constructs new social reality. Spanel is the one who runs the butcher shop providing human meat to the customers.

Spanel's Delicacies reverberates Foucault's notion of how language aids in regulating life, concealing power and normalizing violence. Spanel's classification and labelling practices constitute a discourse that constructs and legitimizes a specific version of reality. Spanel displays the human body which mimics the traditional beef cut. Consequently, labelling each part of humans into delicacies portrays the clear enactment of discursive normalization.

Institutionally endorsed narratives

Foucault states that power and knowledge are inseparable. Power produces knowledge and knowledge in turn reinforces power. The state that allows the shop to label human meat as special meat and delicacies creates a knowledge that legitimizes the power to breed, kill and consume humans. This kind of structuring language makes people justify cannibalism as a fundamental part of living. For instance, instead of using the hand, Spanel categorizes it as upper extremity and for foot she labels it as lower extremity, moreover, other parts of the body such as tongues, penises, noses, testicles are termed as Spanel's delicacies. According to Foucault, this type of categorization reflects how language is disciplined to align with state-sanctioned truths. The words that refer to the real parts of the body that can invoke empathy are completely nullified so that the consumer would assume that he only buys a product and not hands or legs.

A discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse (Foucault, Order 61). Foucault's idea of prison, hospital or asylum to be the institutions that produces discourse aligns with Spanel's butcher shop. In this novel, the shop becomes an institution where truth is produced and regulated. Rather than concealing the cruel act, the normal display of cannibalism as Spanel's Delicacies resonates Foucault's insight on power under the guise of legitimacy, order, or science. Introducing human body parts and aestheticizing it as a decorative display discursively reshapes human desire, framing the consumption of human meat as luxury commodity.

Foucault highlights the multiplicity of discursive elements that circulates among the masses without changing any forms. Spanel, who owns the butcher shop orchestrated a gradual but consistent transformation that embodies disciplinary power in which control is internalized without any abrupt shifts. This subtle approach leads the public to internalize and passively accept the change without any resistance. Furthermore, discourse also helps alter their perception of what is normal. By this kind of discursive practices, biopolitical control becomes effective and micro practices construct violence as routine. Spanel's butcher shop acts as a perfect example of how the deliberate choice of words and arrangement of human meat modifies human flesh into a commercial object further illustrating how power operates not by repressing speech but by structuring it.

As mentioned by Foucault, discourse is a means through which power is circulated and truths are produced which aids in shaping the perception of the subjects. In this aspect, these terminologies transform humans into objects and commodities which replicates Foucault's notion of biopower and governance of life through knowledge systems. These euphemistic terms conceal the violence done to the purpose-bred individuals turning the victims into depersonalized subjects. Consequently, they erase their individuality creating a new social order where cruelty is made aggregable. Additionally, other terms such as 'product' and 'merchandise' also render these beings within an economic discourse where they are treated as mere commodities. In the capitalist framework, these kinds of discourse assist the institutional interest to sustain power by establishing deviant practices as standard and validating what is ethically wrong. In essence, these discursive practices enforce silence by shaping the words. In this novel, this state-sanctioned sanitized language produces a reality in which violence is rendered invisible.

Epistemic suppression of non-dominant identities

This discursive practice of enforcing silence further reinforces Gayatri Spivak's notion of epistemic violence. Spivak emphasizes that the subaltern people are denied access to language and representation in the society. Those people are

stripped off of their agency and are denied any linguistic autonomy. Spivak's term called epistemic violence is reflected in the novel, where the subalterns are denied any agency. The heads who are bred for consumption have no voice or representation in this novel as they are reduced to only consumable objects. As the state uses abstract terms to refer to them, it sustains the system of dehumanization by enforcing silence over them. This enforcement of silence is taken to the extreme where the heads are removed of their vocal cords to avoid any forms of resistance.

Spivak's "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" published in 1988 states that the subaltern is the one who stays outside of hegemonic power structure. They are systematically denied any kind of speech or representation within dominant discourse either be it social, political or geographical context. She uses the term called 'epistemic violence' and argues how imperial systems construct knowledge thereby excluding or silencing those subaltern people. They erase their agency as well as their voice. In this novel, the heads are the subaltern who are not only dehumanized but literally silenced by removing their vocal cords. This inhumane act aligns with the symbolic silencing of Spivak where those people in the margin are denied even the possibility of speech. She describes, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation." (Spivak 80). In this novel, the heads who are subalterns may have agency but they are constructed as voiceless by removing their vocal cords to justify exploitation. When El Gringo states, 'No one wants them to talk because meat doesn't talk,' (17) the biological dehumanization of human heads becomes ideological as their silence is manufactured to preserve capitalist cannibalism.

Further, he states that the heads can communicate with simplified language as they can express cold and hot which reflects the subaltern's experience being reduced and appropriated by hegemonic structure. When Spivak expounds that when a subaltern is allowed to speak, their speech is filtered and reinterpreted by hegemonic structure, this line resonates how the dominant structure simplifies their voice to fit pre-existing narratives. Moreover, these heads are isolated in incubators and later caged to bring out the institutional control of knowledge and being. Their very agency is shaped and limited from their birth which parallels the idea of Spivak where she states that the colonized subject is discursively constructed as inferior and voiceless from the beginning. The inability of the heads to speak is not natural but enforced by the state as they are not inherently mute. As speech implies humanity, the silence is constructed by the dominant system in order to justify their exploitation. This erasure of subjectivity aligns with Spivak's statement that a 'subaltern cannot speak.' In essence, this act of making them voiceless becomes the chilling dramatization of epistemic violence.

Whispers of unspoken resistance

In this novel, the state does not approve of the heads who are bred and slaughtered as real humans. As a result, they have no legal or moral status as human beings though they are the one. Pushing them to the periphery and ensuring no agency given to them, they are the perfect example of subaltern who cannot speak. This violence epistemological strategy to preserve the illusion of ethical consumption is where the discursive practice of Foucault aligns. As these heads' voices are structurally erased from the system by means of discourse that expounds these bodies without any agency.

"The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivak 76). These lines of Spivak in which epistemic violence is remotely orchestrated aligns with this novel where the global health crisis is used as the ideological means to redefine humans as livestock. The heads are not only exploited but are constructed as others though they resemble the same as other humans. Language plays a major role where this ideological foundation is dispersed and circulated. "No one calls them humans, not here, not where it's prohibited. "No, of course they're not pigs, though genetically they're quite similar" (Bazterrica 16). The very term 'Special meat' portrays the deliberate move of linguistic erasure of their identity and making them as others who become unrecognizable within dominant discourse. "When we nullify him, we'll study his brain," she says. Nullify, he thinks, another word that silences the horror" (Bazterrica 136). Here the heads are controlled as mere bodies who are consumed and disposed of. They are not capable of resistance.

Consequently, the riveting moment is the conclusion of the novel, where the protagonist Marcos, who uses a captive female head to give birth to his child finally refers to her as a domesticated animal portrays the brutal culmination of Spivak's concept of epistemic violence. "As he drags the body of the female to the barn to slaughter it, he says to Cecilia, his voice radiant, so pure it wounds: "She had the human look of a domesticated animal" (Bazterrica). It illustrates the core erasure of subjectivity in which female heads are utilized and thrown away denying their agency which marks Spivak's statement that female subaltern cannot be heard or read. This also expounds how the system of dehumanization has shaped society. When Marcos uses the term domesticated animal, he uses language to reclassify humans which reflects how the system's ideology is ingrained in his consciousness. Despite having physical and

emotional intimacy with this female head, he refers to her as a mere animal before slaughtering her. The epistemic violence is illustrated when she is not merely killed but denied the status of speaking and feeling at the end of her life. Her child is taken away before her eyes and yet she is denied the status of being human yet alone a mother. This haunting conclusion with the linguistic act does not justify her killing; rather it affirms her status as non-human and further proves Spivak's statement, the subaltern cannot speak. This epistemic violence of making them invisible with the level of knowledge, classification and silence is enacted by the state in making these people voiceless.

CONCLUSION

In essence, this novel is analysed under the frameworks of Foucault's discursive practice and Spivak's epistemic violence to unravel the mechanism of how knowledge is produced through discursive formation shaping the people's mind on what can be said and what counts as truth. Through these state sanctioned truths, the novel reveals the dehumanization of human heads who are constructed as non-subjects. As Foucault's notion of discursive practice is examined in how the state manufactures the truth through language sanitation, Spivak's epistemic violence is literalized in the erasure of human subjectivity. The last line of the novel, 'so pure it wounds' serves as the echoes of silent assent where the voice of the heads is no longer heard and taught to the world to forget that there was ever a voice.

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