

Molière's *Tartuffe*: A Foucauldian Reading

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Abstract

The present study discusses Foucault's concern with the nature of power in human society. As the concept of power is a major challenge in communal societies, he believes that there is no longer a single dominant power. The play portrays this challenge for obtaining power and the resistance it faces that can be best analyzed in a philosophical term. The paper shows how various orders of power are at work in a house which is very similar to a battlefield. As a classical play, one may think that the father is the head of family and has the final say but it is obvious that different members of the family, even their servant resist this kind of power. So, the paper analyses the status of power structure in a classical play.

Keywords: Foucault, Molière, Power, Resistance, Tartuffe

1. Introduction

The concepts of power or domination over others, has occupied a prominent position within human's thought and society. It catches the attention of many philosophers and social scientists in different historical eras and every philosopher and society defines it in its own way. Previously, it was thought that individuals are either supposed to be governors or to be governed by a governor. But Foucault (1980) takes a step further and argues that power is not something that belongs absolutely to one person since the very nature of power necessitates circulation. In fact, his revolutionary idea about power puts an end to this age-old and simple-minded definition of power. As a great master of comedy, Molière criticizes the authority of church and believes that revealed religion and natural morality provide guidance for moral action (Jones, 1943, p. 58). In this way, as the author of play, he resists the power of the church and challenges its authority. He rebukes those religious hypocrites who use religion to accomplish their material objectives. In his play, he portrays a complex web of relationships in a house along with their struggle for dominance over others and the resistance against that exercised power.

As Foucault says “the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property but as a strategy” (1980, p. 26) he adds that power is present in the relationships and interactions of individuals. According to him, Power is “a relation between forces or rather every relation between forces is a power relation” (As cited in Deleuze, p. 59). Instead of a single, dominant power, there are complex webs of power relations. In fact, Power “functions in the form of a chain . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application”. (As cited in Mills p. 35)

Power can come from everywhere and can head everywhere. Where there is power, there is always some sort of resistance against it. Power and resistance are co-dependent and without

resistance there could be no power. This possibility of resistance gives different shapes to power. By this very nature, power can utilize different method and strategies for its exertion based on the time and place and at the same time individuals serve as elements of exertion of power. Different institutions exert their powers on individuals and individuals in turns show resistance upon facing power. So, the very nature of power is productive rather than repressive. In this way, individuals can be viewed as active subjects for the exertion of power rather than passive objects in the face of it.

Molière is the great master of comedy and his popularity is not limited to seventeenth century France, rather it resists the test of time. Despite Roman Rolland's remark who thought that Molière's comedies are of not much use though" they may satisfy the initial needs of a people's theatre" (As cited in Beach, 2005, p. 17) one can see that his plays are true example of classical works with characters that hold a mirror up to Nature that is true to every man in all times and places and at the same time, they reflect the evils of his society at that time. Hypocrisy, anticlericalism, and moderation are typical Molièorean themes which affected eighteenth-century literature. (Leon, 2009, p. 12) And we see these themes incorporated in the play as Cléante is the mouthpiece in this play to mention them when he speaks about the importance of moderation "Come on! You've blustered enough! You always exaggerate; you lack judgment; you throw yourself from one extreme to the other". (Molière, 2008, p.88)

The theme of fraud and hypocrisy is something that can be seen in all literatures and every one may deal with it here and there. As Woodworth (1934) claims the character of a Hypocrite or Parasite is so fully known to audience and his or her nature is fully described by its very name that it needs no further explanation (p.18). And even the subtitle of the play "Tartuffe: The Imposter" is so revealing that it immediately gives clue to the readers or spectators what

kind of character they are actually dealing with. As Cléante says “you should distinguish between mere appearances and true virtue.”(Molière, 2008, p.89)

As Greenberg puts it, previously, “Every father in his household is the mirror of the king, the “Father of the Nation”, in his kingdom.” (p.118) so, when the status of the father as the head of family is challenged, there is a constant struggle for gaining power within the domain of family. According to Buckley (2006), one can view the comedies of Molière as a reaction against patriarchal authority (p.52). This shattering of the traditional patriarchal family and the critical condition of authoritarian, tyrannical father figure as the previous head of family can be seen well in this play. In fact, the play portrays best webs of power relations between characters. No one owns the power, rather it circulates between characters.

2. Analysis

The arrival of Tartuffe changes the power relations in the family and everyone reacts to Tartuffe’s power in his or her own way. With the exception of obsessed Orgon and his fanatic mother, no one remains silent even Dorine as a maid in the house is mad at Tartuffe” It’s a scandal to see a stranger become the master here” (Molière, 2008, p.6). Then Dorine continues with this that “now he forgets who he is, contradicts everyone, and tells everyone what to do” (Molière, 2008, p.6). Orgon’s house turns into a battlefield for individuals to fight for power. There are webs of power relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, father and son, father and daughter; even their maid struggles for power and does not remain totally submissive.

Mme. Pernelle is jealous of Elmire since she is young, gorgeous, and of stunning beauty that enjoys her life to the fullest when she says “You’re extravagant; I’m horrified to see you dressed up like a princess.”(Molière, 2008, p.4) As an old woman, she is well-aware that she

loses her beauty and strength and is no longer the lady of the house. Her position is taken by Elmire and this is evident in her speech “my instructions are rejected; no one respects me; every one speaks arrogantly- it is Bedlam here.”(Molière, 2008, p.4) There is a constant battle between Elmire and Mme. Pernelle. She thinks of Elmire no more than an enemy, a rival who rubs her of her power “Daughter-in-Law, in your house you hold the floor all the time and we’re not allowed to speak.” (Molière, 2008, p.8)

Consequently, she resorts to religion as an alternative to compensate her loss of power. The smart Dorine knows well the reason behind Mme. Pernelle’s ardent support of religion “Yes, she lives austere, but she’s prudish only because she’s an old lady, and straitlaced because she has a feeble body.” (Molière, 2008, p.7)She has lost all her charms as a lady and feels powerless; therefore, she seeks her solace in religion. She is only capable of giving comments about religious issues. So, she uses it as her weapon or strategy to exercise her power over the family members. May be religion is her strategy against the cruel world as Dorine says “now she turns her back on the world that’s left her behind” (Molière, 2008, p.8).Cléante resists the kind of power that Tartuffe exerted through hypocrisy and pretending to be a religious saint since unlike Orgon and Mme. Pernelle, Cléante knows what true piety is “I know what I’m saying, and Heaven itself knows what I think. I’m not a slave to fraud” (Molière, 2008, p.17). He is aware that how these religious hypocrites exert their power in their own special way when he says “they use our own holy weapons against us” (Molière, 2008, p.18). These hypocrites do not exert their power directly but they have their own strategies since “They let others speak angrily; meanwhile their behavior silently corrects ours” (Molière, 2008, p.18).

She constantly scolds the family members for their worldliness and filthy behaviors; even she accuses them of insanity. She is happy that someone like Tartuffe comes and manages to win

the spotlight and becomes the center of attention. Now that she is powerless, at least she takes pleasure to see that Tartuffe has the upper hand over her daughter-in-law. Her answer to Damis supports this idea “And he controls everything properly. He intends to lead you to Heaven, and my son is right to urge you to love him” (Molière, 2008, p.5). But Damis cannot tolerate this simple-mindedness and wants to resist the power of Tartuffe when he hears Mme. Pernelle’s shallow justification; he tells her “What, should I allow a bigoted hypocrite to be a tyrant in this house? Are we forbidden to enjoy ourselves unless that fine fellow designs to permit it?”(Molière, 2008, p.5)

As a true follower of classicism, Molière holds up a mirror up to life and women’s condition of living at that. As he was much a head of his time, an opposition against forced marriage can be seen in his plays. Longumare sheds some light on this custom by saying that in the 17th century, young noblewomen received no decent education and were forced to marry based on their parents’ wishes and preferences or else they had to enter convents (As cited in Jones, p. 22).The same mishap occurred to Molière. When Orgon informs her that he intends to join their family and Tartuffe in a marriage, she remains speechless and just says “What? You want, Father.....” (Molière , 2008, p.23). Mariane is a submissive, traditional girl with no resistance .Dorine takes action and assists her in the process when she hears Mariane’s desperate remark “But a father has so much power over us that I’ve never had the strength to say anything” (Molière, 2008, p.31). Dorine acts as an obstacle in the way of Orgon to reach what he wants. He wants to use his power as the head of family but Dorine resists his power to show that with power comes resistance. In fact, from the very first Act, she shows herself to be a caring and courageous person who is not blind to what happens around her. She confirms her being as something more than just a submissive servant who is there only to obey her master’s orders. She

appears to be smart and her tongue-in-chick remark shows that she sees the strangeness of Orgon's behavior and his obsession with Tartuffe. Romero (1997) believes that "Orgon's obsession is not identified; it is depicted as an ambiguous, undirected yearning, apparently for nothing more than social success and esteem." (p. 8) But as a self-confident maid, Dorine cannot stay indifferent when she sees that Orgon only asks about Tartuffe's health condition despite the fact that he also knows Elmire is not feeling well, so Dorine says "both are doing well, and I'll go tell Madame how encouraged you are by her inconvenience" (Molière, 2008, p.14). He heightens the comic effect of the play by "engaging with the foolish protagonist in many ways that highlight the protagonist's folly." (Hawcroft, 2007, p. 113)

Dorine argues with Orgon the entire scene 2, Act II of the play while Mariane says nothing to defend her love. Dorine challenges Orgon's decision and asks him "Do you think it's a good idea to give a young woman like your daughter to a man like that? Think about what's appropriate ;"(Molière, 2008, p.26) Even she puts on bold face and claims that "You cannot do better than follow my instructions."(Molière, 2008, p.26) She is far ahead of what one may expect from a maid. As a patriarch, Orgon tries to silent feminine voice and to decide on behalf of her passive daughter but Dorine protests him for his obsession with Tartuffe.

In return, Orgon threatens Dorine when he says "The back of my hand will teach you something."(Molière, 2008, p.29) In fact he resorts to physical action which was and is an old weapon in the hand of male figures against women. Orgon's remark shows the decentered nature of power, so the powerful figure exercise his power not on one person but on persons. And Orgon's wants to exercise his power since the main function of power is to be exerted rather than to be owned or gained by individuals.

As it was mentioned before, power circulates since it does not come from one direction. So, it may come from below so “people traditionally constructed as powerless and oppressed can be seen as actually having agency” which means that they have the ability to exert power and affect its enactment (Huntington & Gilmore, 2006, p. 195)._As Dorine, the maid is shown to be powerful and at the same time resistant to power. After all the efforts that Dorine made, the best reaction of Mariane appears to be this to resist his authoritarian father “If I’m forced to do that, I’ll kill myself.” (Molière, 2008, p.33)

When Dorine tries to exercise her power of wisdom to reunite the two stubborn lovers, Mariane and Valère, they just try to imitate each other’s passivity and deny their love for each other out of pride; again Dorine intervenes and set the things up. So, the submissive Mariane finally assures Valère of his love but points out that she cannot go against her father’s will “ I can’t be responsible for a father’s wishes, but I will not give myself to anyone other than you.” (Molière, 2008, p.46) Finally, after all the efforts that Dorine made, Mariane gains the courage to beg his father directly but humbly for reconsideration of arranged marriage which is a kind of significant development for this passive girl “I beseech you, on my knees- save me from being given to someone I abhor; don’t force me to a desperate act by insisting on your power.”(Molière, 2008, p.71)

Elmire is the voice of moderation in the play and she always has the ability to control her passions. When Tartuffe makes a move on her, instead of foolishly reporting this event to her obsessed husband, she does not lose her temper and tries to make most of it as she says “ Real women laugh at such foolishness; they don’t bother to tell their husbands about it.”(Molière, 2008, p.56) So she seizes this opportunity instead of spoiling the chance to hold it against Tartuffe in a decent situation. She wants to exert her power as tactfully as possible when she

finds Tartuffe's weak point. She talks with her husband and persuades him reasonably that Tartuffe is a religious hypocrite who wants to take advantage of his wife but he is so stubborn that she has to set a trap for Tartuffe and at the same time prove this point to her husband. So, she tells her husband to hide under the table to hear with his own ears and tells him "You'll be the one to put an end to this crazy passion as soon as you think he has gone far enough" (Molière, 2008, p.76). In this way she exerts her feminine power and at the same time empowers her husband. As a wise woman, she acts in a way to reveal the true identity of a hypocrite and at the same time, promise her husband to restore his glory as the head of the family by this plan "You'll protect your interests; you'll be the master" (Molière, 2008, p.76). But Tartuffe is so wise and tricky unlike Orgon who can be manipulated to the most foolish things. Tartuffe resists the charming power of Elmire when he says "I cannot trust those delicious words you have spoken unless you give me some evidence that you really mean them; your behavior must assure me of your feelings." (Molière, 2008, p.78)

What evident in this play is the destruction of male-dominated atmosphere and the simultaneous rise of feminine voice and the formation of feminine identity in the characters of Dorine and Elmire. Although we see passive female figures like Mme. Pernelle and Mariane in the play, but it can be considered as a classic background for the feminist movements in the 20th century.

Orgon resisting the power of his family members by being so silly and blindly follows Tartuffe and defending him in front of them "All of you are brazenly doing everything you can to take this holy man from me. But the more efforts you make to send him away, the more efforts I'll make to hold on to him." (Molière, 2008, p.61) He does all these to show them who was the real head of the family when he says "Ha! I defy you all; you'll see that you must obey me, that

I'm the master here."Tartuffe further manipulates him by warning him that he might be influenced by his wife "Oh, my brother, a woman can very easily dominate her husband."(Molière, 2008, p.64) Orgon assures him that no such thing happens and while he resists the power of his family, he willingly dominated by Tartuffe when he says "I'll defy them further by making you my heir, right now, fair and square, and I'll give you all that I have." (Molière, 2008, p.65)In fact Tartuffe and Orgon's relationship is characterized as one-way mastery and submission.

It seems as if Tartuffe casts a spell on Orgon while he is completely blind to what others see clearly. Tartuffe heads on Elmire and Damis gets too much angry and wants to reports it to his father. Elmire tries to stop him but he says I want to "confront the arrogant traitor who usurped my position, and take revenge for his hypocrisy and insolence."(Molière, 2008, p.56) But again, Tartuffe manipulates Orgon under the cover of religion and uses discourse to keep his power intact. His remarks satisfy Orgon to the extent that he kicks his son out of the house and says "I'm taking away your inheritance and giving you my curse."(Molière, 2008, p.62) He disinherits his son and instead gives all his possessions as a gift to Tartuffe. Here Tartuffe best shows his total mastery over obsessed Orgon despite all the struggles that Damis does. All the familial bonds like father and son's love for each other are powerless in front of Orgon's obsession with Tartuffe. Damis, Elmire, and Marianne's honesty and love for Orgon are powerless in comparison to power strategies of Tartuffe who uses religious hypocrisy to affect the simple-minded Orgon. Damis might think that his father would take his side in his struggle with Tartuffe but it seems that he loses his mind. May be he experiences a mid-life crisis and now with the arrival of Tartuffe he feels better. He takes pleasure to see his lost power as the head of the family now incarnates in the character of Tartuffe. He turns into a puppet at the

hands of Tartuffe since his lost power is now exercised through Tartuffe. Tartuffe knows well how he has Orgon in his hands as he said “I’ve persuaded him to see everything and to believe nothing.”(Molière, 2008, p.81) He is conscious of his domination over him and knows well how to handle and manipulate him.

Tartuffe chooses a well-to-do French family and turns their house into a battlefield. First, he conquers the heart of father and manipulates him. He uses austerity and chastity as a way to control the family life and holds them within the domain of his power. Orgon and his mother are submitted to him since he hides his true intentions under the cover of religion. This mask of religion acts as his strategy to win a place in Orgon’s heart and then plans to usurp his house and wealth. Tartuffe learns something about a box which contains secret documents belonging to Orgon’s fugitive friend. In the Scene 6, Act V of the play, after Orgon and his family find out about treason charges against Orgon because of that secret box, Cléante says “So this is his weapon! That’s how he thinks he can claim all your possessions!” (Molière, 2008, p.102) At this point in the play, all the family members are somehow united against Tartuffe and a power struggle between them and Tartuffe get worsen.

When Orgon discovers the true nature of Tartuffe and wants to take action against him and wants throw him out of his house, Tartuffe holds it against Orgon. So he uses his knowledge against him to gain power since “power and knowledge are biconditionally related. The idea of any knowledge independent of power is a false abstraction.” (Nola,20014, p.91)since “power produces knowledge” (Foucault,1977, p. 27) He gathers enough information against Orgon to put him in prison so that he can no longer bother him as he says:

You’re the one who has to leave, you, who pretend to be the master. The house belongs to me. I’ll make that known, and I’ll prove that you have no recourse, no way to challenge me

with these cowardly tricks. You can't injure me. I have the power to resist; to face down your claims; to avenge Heaven, which you have attacked; to make you sorry you tried to throw me out (Molière, 2008, p.84).

The play had been subjected to many revisions to obtain permission for performance but “None of the Revolution’s alternative versions of the play successfully reformed Tartuffe by eradicating the monarchical authority embedded in the text.” (Leon, 2009, p. 71)The king can be seen as a part of his subjects as they are located within the radius of his gaze. So the subjects internalize this notion of being watched as if a hidden eye always watches their moves (Greenberg1992, p. 139) when the Officer says “We live under a king who is the enemy of fraud, a king who is guided by moderation and intelligence, who knows all his subjects, who is never deceived by impostors.”(Molière, 2008, p.106)So, the power exerted over the individuals but it is not visible and they act normally as if they are always under some sort of control or as Downing (2008) states “surveillance is transformed from a matter of external overseeing to a rigorous self-policing” (p.84). Although “king remains the central personage in the whole legal edifice of the West” (Foucault, 1977, p. 94) but based on this view of power he is not the only person who owns power. The king and state are there to shape and control the relationship between individuals so that all of them can gain benefits from the exertion of their power, as a matter of fact, their power restore the order to family. Finally, the imprisonment of Tartuffe shows the circulatory nature of power that nobody owns it.

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