

## Discourse and Power: A Foucauldian Analysis of Samira Ahmed's *Internment*

Sonayana Saeed<sup>1</sup>

Asma Kaleem<sup>2</sup>

Yasir Arafat<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

*The present study takes a look at Samira Ahmed's novel, Internment, to analyze discourse as an instrument used by American elites to influence the masses and exploit the Muslims living in America. Furthermore, the study shows how discourse becomes a weapon of resistance used by Muslims against their persecutors as well. This qualitative thematic analysis utilizes Foucault's theory on the relationship of discourse and power. It confirms that discourse and power are interdependent in the sense that each produces and is produced by the other. This means that discourse is not only the result of power but also a tool for exercising that very power. The ones who possess power also possess the privilege to use discourse as they desire while the same discourse enables them to maintain that power over people by shaping their knowledge and perception of reality. Furthermore, it indicates that in addition to producing power, discourse can also become a means to thwart it. This study reveals that the Camp Director and the President in the novel, Internment, use discourse as a means to exercise their power as well as to maintain control over people. On the other hand, the Muslims use discourse to undermine the authority of the Director and the President by revolting against them and ultimately winning freedom for themselves.*

**Keywords:** Internment, Islamophobia, Foucault, discourse, power, instrument, subvert

### 1. Introduction

For centuries, power structures have exploited the weaker sections of society through various means; discourse being one of them. Discourse

---

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, NUML, Islamabad

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, NUML, Islamabad

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, NUML, Islamabad

simply refers to written, spoken and even nonverbal forms of communication or exchange of ideas (Discourse). History stands witness to such systems of exploitation that have even resulted in the establishment of concentration camps where innocent victims are incarcerated and stripped of even the most basic human rights. Such imprisonment of large groups of people without any trial or cause, especially for political or military reasons is known as internment (Internment). Concentration camps such as the existing Uighur camps and Jewish camps during the holocaust have attracted the attention of writers and scholars who try to paint their picture, understand the causes and explain the means used to commit such atrocities. Among these writers is Samira Ahmed, an Indian born American writer, who after witnessing the Islamophobic and racist inclination of the previous American President has written a young adult fiction set in America's near future.

Ahmed's 2019 novel, *Internment*, follows the story of a seventeen year old Muslim American girl, Layla, who is forced into an internment camp in the middle of nowhere along with her parents and thousands of other Muslims. The President calls his discriminatory, illegal and inhumane policies a way of making the country great again. The internment camp called Mobius is controlled by the Camp Director who is a wicked and manipulative man. Layla soon realizes that if she ever wants to be free again she will have to start a rebellion against the Director. She motivates other teenagers at the camp to join her resistance and is fortunate enough to be assisted by some of the humane camp guards in her struggle as well. She uses her speech and written words to eventually gather enough support from within the camp as well as from outside its fences to topple its authority and win freedom for the prisoners. The novel addresses numerous issues of grave significance. Among these, the most consequential is how discourse can be a means of exercising power and challenging it at the same time. It also shows how discourse not only produces power but is also produced by it and vice versa.

Since the novel is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of modern technological advancements comes to the forefront as well which enable real-time global communication. The downside of such developments is that false or manipulative narratives and discourses, which only serve the interest of a few elites, can easily be spread and used to influence unsuspecting masses. One such example in the real world is the narrative regarding Muslims across the globe that portrays them as villains and terrorists who should be

feared, which is being promoted to serve the selfish interests of a few powerful groups. This is extremely harmful for the Muslim population since such negative discourses become the basis for their constant marginalization, suffering and oppression. With this in mind, the present paper aims to analyze the complementary relationship of discourse and power to act as the instrument as well as the effect of each other in the novel, *Internment*. Moreover, it also endeavors to identify the ways in which discourse has been used as a means to challenge power in the novel.

## 2. Literature Review

Samira Ahmed's *Internment* was published in 2019 which makes it a contemporary young adult fiction on which not too much research has yet been done. The novel tells a story that the author claims takes place only "15 seconds in the future" owing to the prevalent political climate of United States of America at the time of its publication (Cary, 2019). Teachers are being encouraged to teach this novel in middle schools and high schools because the issue it addresses is germane to the predicament not only in USA but also in other parts of the globe where racist and Islamophobic practices are widespread. One teacher's resource for the book puts great emphasis on studying the German brother and sister duo mentioned in Ahmed's novel having the name "The White Rose" who used to publish pamphlets to incite rebellion among college students against Nazis during the world war era. The resource claims that this study will help students understand and identify societal injustices that exist in the modern world (Social Justice Leaflet Mini-Research Project). A number of reviews have been written on the novel owing to Samira Ahmed's New York Times Best Selling Author status. One very detailed review of the novel notices parallels between the internment camp Director and a political leader of USA at the time of its publication. It also notes how well elaborated the intersectional issues within the Muslim community are that are used and exploited by external forces to subjugate Muslims (Joce, 2019).

The title of the novel and its main theme of internment is based on the real life events of imprisonment Jewish and Japanese victims during the Second World War that are also mentioned in the novel itself (Ahmed, 2019). Numerous studies have been conducted on the real life events that inspired this theme. One research paper analyzes the development of internment camps in Britain in the 1940s that imprisoned not only the aliens but also any local individual who was in contact with them. These

camps proved to be disastrous not only for the victims but also for the political powers involved in their making (Burlington, 1992). Just as concluded in this paper, Samira Ahmed's camp *Mobius* becomes an administrative and political failure and gets shut down as well. Another research article sheds light on how the formerly interned Japanese are now reclaiming their freedom by travelling back to the country that had once incarcerated them. They were refused the freedom of speech and movement while they were in internment but now they are responding to that oppression by writing memoirs and travel accounts of those countries (Cheung, 2008). This article shows the power of discourse that the victims had been denied and which they are now using to fight back. The same power and manipulation through discourse is found in *Internment*.

Whenever speaking of discourse and power, it is Michel Foucault who comes to mind. Many researchers have employed his theories to study the functioning and role of discourse in shaping knowledge to enhance power and how power enables such discourses. One researcher uses Foucault's ideas to explain the development of human rights discourse through discursive structure in which power is exercised and the configurations of knowledge and power that exist (Manokha, 2009). Another scholar analyzes the power relations that are prevalent in most workplaces embedded in discourse. This power on one hand can control employees and on the other hand also lend power to employees to resist such controls (Hearn, 2008).

From the literature reviewed for the purpose of the present paper, it can be seen that although the concept of internment has long provided fertile ground for research and Foucault's theories have interested scholars ever since he presented them, very little work has been done on Ahmed's novel, *Internment*, owing to its very recent publication. Thus, a lot of aspects of this work are open to research such as racism, Islamophobia, feminism and internment as depicted by the author. The present paper is an attempt at filling the knowledge gap that exists regarding discourse and power in this novel.

### **3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study is a qualitative analysis for which the primary data is comprised of the 2019 novel, *Internment*, by Samira Ahmed. It relies on thematic analysis of the data to achieve the research objectives. After an initial reading of the novel, the theoretical underpinnings were studied

thoroughly. The novel was then re-read with sound theoretical knowledge to collect relevant data for analysis. This data has, thus, been dissected and scrutinized to see how discourse functions as a means and effect of power in the novel as well as a way of overturning authority.

### **3.1 Foucault's Theory of Discourse and Power**

The theoretical foundation for this study is based on Foucauldian notions of discourse and power. Foucault views discourse as the key element to help unfold power structures in the poststructuralist world because discourse is where knowledge and power unite. Discourse has the ability to produce, reinforce and transmit power. To explain this relation, Foucault holds that discourse is an instrument of power as well as its effect. This means that discourse and power are in fact two complementary forces in a power relation where each equally shapes and is shaped by the other (Foucault, 1978). However, by claiming that discourse is informed and shaped by practice, Foucault in no way implies that one of the two is more powerful than the other. This claim also indicates that discourse is not only present in the form of words and text but also in the actions that are performed and the practices that are carried out in daily life. The knowledge of people is informed by such practices and the ability to shape this knowledge through discourse gives one power over others (1977). Through discourse, societies establish their own versions of truth which they try to promote and uphold in order to maintain power through selected institutions and a class of elites (1972).

Interestingly, Foucault also states that while on one hand discourse produces and is produced by power, on the other hand it can also subvert power by questioning its structures and rendering it unstable. In this way discourse can be used to cripple authority by meddling with the very foundations on which power structures are erected and collapsing them by rendering them fragile through subversion. Simply put, discourse can enable power and also deconstruct it. Therefore, the function, use and effect of discourse are ever-changing (1978). The present study has used this framework to show how exploitative power structures depicted in the novel *Internment* are dependent on various discursive practices. Such practices are in turn dependent on these power structures. The study further analyzes how discourse can also be used as a weapon against oppressive structures to deconstruct and thwart them.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Findings**

The present paper has earned its right to be written because in today's world, people are bombarded with different narratives and discourses through media and texts. Understanding the role of discourse in establishing and maintaining the structures of power can help people see why certain types of discourses are promoted and others are silenced. In this way, people can make sound judgments about what to believe and also how to use their freedom of expression more effectively. Therefore, this paper is significant as it will enable young people to identify and understand oppressive discursive practices and formulate ways to counter them. It also brings *Internment* to the attention of future researchers who may study the issues of racism, Islamophobia, feminism, Marxist power structures and Nietzsche's view of cyclic nature of history in this text.

##### **4.1 Discourse as an Instrument and Effect of Power**

Foucault states that discourse can produce and transmit power (1972). This phenomenon is seen in practice in the novel when Layla laments that it has been made mandatory for all to view the President's weekly racist and Islamophobic speech under the guise of a "national security address" (Ahmed, 2019, p. 14). It shows how, through constant reiteration of hatred towards Muslims by the President, the general public is influenced into cornering their Muslim countrymen as well. There are also flyers distributed around to encourage people to burn books written for or by Muslims. All such forms of discourse lend power to the President by spreading Islamophobia among the people and furthering his plan of incarcerating all Muslims. In addition to the President, the Camp Director also uses discourse to threaten and scare the internees into submission. When he confronts Layla for the first time, he uses his manipulative discourse and threatening demeanor to make her reveal things she had wished to keep secret. He tricks her into telling him of her non-Muslim boyfriend and then uses this information to unnerve her by stating how the "Exclusion Authority frowns on this type of interreligious mingling" (p. 128). His intention is to put her off her stroke by breaking her spirit. Moreover, the Director keeps reiterating the camp's motto of unity, security and prosperity throughout the novel in an attempt to trick people into believing that the camp is actually a glorious place. He acts on the principle of telling a lie long enough for it to replace the truth because in reality the motto is nothing more than a propaganda to fool people into obeying him. After the first act of rebellion, the Director becomes infuriated and threatens on the camp media units that until the culprits are

caught, “the entire community will be held accountable”(p. 148). He claims that he is only trying to maintain peace and discipline while the rebels are the villains who have “willfully disrupted the order” by wreaking havoc in their so-called peaceful camp so those who cooperate with him will “find rewards worth their while” (p. 148). All this is done in a manipulative attempt to scare some and tempt others into submission as that is the only way he can maintain his power over them without becoming openly violent. It is important to note here that while discourse is lending power to the Director and the President, such discourse is possible only for the elites and the authorities because they are the powerful few who make up the version of reality that others must believe. None of the individual subjects have the freedom to start a discourse without facing dire consequences.

#### **4.2 Discourse as a Means to Subvert Power**

While on one hand discourse produces and is produced by power, it can also be a hindrance, a threat and the starting point for resistance against power (Foucault, 1972). In the novel, Layla’s father, Ali Amin, is a poet and a college professor. He writes poems that incite people to speak up against oppression while they still have the ability and freedom to do so. His poems and books are so powerful that all copies are destroyed at state organized book-burnings because of their potential to make people question the President’s authority (Ahmed, 2019, p. 11). Once imprisoned, a group of Muslims at Camp Mobius use discourse to start a revolt against the director with help from some of the camp guards and people on the outside. When Jake, one of the camp guards, tells Layla not to give up, she asks him if there is still any hope and he responds with the word “Insha’ Allah”(p. 108). This word is soon identified by the rebels as a shibboleth; a word that would help differentiate between Us and Them. It becomes a clandestine declaration of unity and an identity marker for the rebels. Since almost every action of the Muslims is under surveillance and monitored through cameras and drones, it is impossible to openly organize a rebellion. Thus, they use language to secretly gain numbers without getting caught. In addition, the protestors gathered outside the camp raise slogans to set the Muslims free which significantly undermines the Director’s power (Ahmed, 2019). Layla also refers to Nietzsche and the “White Rose” to explain how they can turn written texts into a weapon against the camp administration.(p. 111). The White Rose was a German brother and sister duo during the world war that wrote anti-Nazi pamphlets and started an uprising against the regime. Layla acts on the same

principle and secretly starts writing articles against the oppression at Mobius which she asks her boyfriend, David, to get published. As a result of her powerful expression, media vans, reporters, human rights groups and protestors start lining up outside the camp fence. Through all these practices, the Muslims in the novel use discourse as an instrument to undermine and expose the power structure that oppresses them. Moreover, the Director of camp Mobius is fully aware of the power of discourse so he limits the discourse for Muslims by monitoring all their interactions and ensuring that within the camp library all “internment-approved titles are by long-dead white dudes” (p. 82). He knows that if the Muslims gain knowledge through written words, they will gain power and consequentially develop a voice of their own which will give them even more power until they will no longer remain subservient to him. All these examples prove how effective a tool discourse can be to challenge and topple authority.

### **4.3 Findings**

This analysis has revealed that discourse and power are interdependent as each produces and results from the other. The President and the Director, both use discourse as an instrument to manipulate, threaten and buy people into submission which allows them to maintain and exercise power over them. In this way their power is dependent on their discourse, however, they are able to practice such discourse only because they have power. Muslims, on the other hand, do not have freedom of speech so they are powerless and because they are powerless they do not have the freedom of speech as well.

In terms of using discourse as a means to subvert power, the words of Ali Amin, Layla and the protestors are so powerful that they become a threat to the authority of the President and the Director. Layla effectively motivates people inside the camp to revolt against the Director through her words. The director is well aware of the power of words so he limits and controls the access of Muslims to books so that they remain unaware, ignorant and incapable of rising to power. On the other hand, the articles written by Layla are successful in inspiring outsiders to stand up to the authorities and come to the prisoners’ aid. Furthermore, the slogans chanted by the protestors outside the fence act as a counter to the motto chanted by the administration inside the fence. The overall effect of these discursive practices is that the power structure that enabled the Director to



oppress Muslims is toppled, the camp is shut down and all the Muslims are allowed to go home as free citizens.

The examples of discourse and their relation to power as analyzed in this paper have been summed up in the following table:

Table 4.1: Textual Examples of Discourse and its Relation to Power

Character	Discourse	Purpose	Relation to Power
The President of USA	Weekly National Security Address on TV	To give the President power to execute his plan of incarcerating Muslims by spreading fear	Instrument and Effect of Power
	Printing flyers for book burnings		
Camp Director	Manipulating Layla	To maintain power over the prisoners without becoming openly violent	
	Reiterating the camp motto		
	Threatening/tempting the internees		
Ali Amin	Writing poetry books	To encourage people to question unjust rulers	Means to Subvert Power
	Delivering university lectures		
Layla Amin	Reminding of the White Rose	To inspire an uprising inside the camp through spoken and outside the camp through written words	
	Writing articles		
	Speaking to internees		
Jake	Creating a Shibboleth	To unite against authorities in secrecy	
Protestors	Raising slogans in favor of Muslims	To weaken the Director's hold	
Camp Library	Books containing only limited, biased and half true knowledge	To prevent Muslims from becoming aware enough to gain power and challenge authorities	

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout history, discourse and power have remained interdependent. Power structures depend on discourse to compel the masses to remain subservient and to even exploit them. Theorists like Foucault have tried to understand and explain this relationship of power and discourse while writers like Samira Ahmed have tried to depict how they function in relation to each other, through literature. The analysis of Ahmed's

*Internment* under Foucauldian lens shows how the elite use discourse to exploit Muslims and how Muslims use discourse to resist and fight back in the novel. Understanding this relationship of discourse and power is essential because people often get subjugated through discourse without even realizing it and a fair knowledge of this process will help them resist any such oppression.

### References

- Ahmed, S. (2019). *Internment*. New York, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Burletson, L. (1992). The state, internment and public criticism in the second world war. *Immigrants and Minorities; Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 11(3), 102-124. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02619288.1992.9974791>
- Cary, A. (2019, April). *Samira Ahmed: Who Gets to Feel Home in America?* Retrieved November 2020, from BookPage: <https://bookpage.com/interviews/23880-samira-ahmed-ya#.X78rls0zbIV>
- Cheung, F. (2008). Reclaiming Mobility: Japanese American Travel Writing after the Internment. *Studies in Travel Writing*, 12(2), 137-165. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3197/136451408X329743>
- Compact Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Wordpower Guide*. (2001). New York: Ocford University Press.
- Discourse*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2020, from Oxford Learner's Dictionary.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punishment*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*.
- Hearn, M. (2008). Developing a critical discourse: Michel Foucault and the cult of solidarity. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 5(1), 21-34. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17405900701768836>
- Internment*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2020, from Dictionary.com: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/internment>

- 
- Joce. (2019). *Book Review: Internment by Samira Ahmed – Incisive, Deliberate, and Unforgettable*. Retrieved 2020, from The Quiet Pond: A Book blog: <https://thequietpond.com/2019/05/05/internment-by-samira-ahmed-incisive-deliberate-and-unforgettable/>
- Manokha, I. (2009). Foucault's Concept of Power and the Global Discourse of Human Rights. *Global Society*, 23(4), 429-452. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13600820903198792>
- Social Justice Leaflet Mini-Research Project*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2020, from Teachers Pay Teachers: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Social-Justice-Leaflet-Mini-Research-Project-4785706>