

Exploring the Dynamics of Power Relation in the Novel *Apeirogen* by Colum McCann

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ABSTRACT

This study, entitled *Exploring the Dynamics of Power Relation in the Novel Apeirogen by Colum McCann*, the objective of this study to describes the issue of the dynamics of power relations in *Apeirogen* by Colum McCann and Explaining how the characters deals with the dynamics of power relations in the novel *Apeirogen*. employs a qualitative method with a textual analysis approach, using Michel Foucault's (2003) theory of power relations as the analytical framework. Set against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *Apeirogen* presents the true stories of two fathers—one Israeli, one Palestinian—who both lose their daughters to political violence. The findings indicate that power in the novel is portrayed as decentralized and pervasive, manifesting through social discourse, institutional structures, and personal experiences of loss. Power dynamics are represented through mechanisms such as military control, surveillance, restricted mobility, and cultural narratives. The characters, particularly Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan, respond to these structures by transforming their grief into acts of political resistance and cross-border dialogue. Their responses challenge dominant power structures and open space for alternative forms of agency based on empathy, shared memory, and nonviolent activism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Power can be defined in the context of relationships between people and expressed in simple symbolic notation. Departing from this definition, a statement about the comparability of power was developed, or the relative degree of power possessed by two people or collectively. In addition, power is a series of forces both individual and group to control and dominate others. The fact that some individuals or groups have more power than others is one of the most obvious aspects of human life. Therefore, the concept of power has existed for a long time and spread like other social concepts (Dahl, R. A, 2007). Building on this foundational understanding, the concept of power relations emerges as a crucial mechanism through which power is not only distributed but actively exercised and negotiated within social contexts.

Moreover, Power Relations include interactions in which a person has a significant social influence over others, allowing them to direct the actions of others as they see fit. This can be done in

a coercive way to gain obedience or through less urgent methods, even though more subtle approaches. In this context, usually, strong groups will dominate against those who are less influential in social interaction. The occurrence of indications of domination and control or even colonization of weak objects will increase social inequality of concern. As a result, there is verbal and nonverbal conquest as well as resistance to maintain each other's position in social life competition (Essien, E. D, 2020). Within the context of power relations, this dialectical process of domination and resistance forms the basis of interdependence, where the power exerted by one group shapes the actions and responses of others, fostering a continuous cycle of influence and counter-influence. Therefore, the dynamics of power relations encourage individuals or groups to achieve something inseparable from the dependence of other parties. The impulse establishes a relationship of dependence in its importance on the power possessed. In the end, the greater the dominance of A, the greater the control over B. Because of this, the ruler will do whatever is in his interest over the subject under control. So, under certain conditions, the subject must obey the power of others because the existence of binding rules becomes a tool for all policies. Where there is power, there will be resistance because each individual or group will maintain its existence (Hartmann, J, 2003). This illustrates how modern power operates insidiously, not through force, but by molding desires and beliefs, restricting genuine freedom.

This illustrates how modern power operates insidiously, not through force, but by molding desires and beliefs, restricting genuine freedom. In this context, deals or agreements in both economic and social settings are often shaped by the underlying power structures, where the dominant parties use their influence to establish terms that align with their interests. These dynamics reflect the broader class struggles that shape the way power and resources are distributed, with the dominant class leveraging their control to dictate the terms of these "deals," reinforcing existing inequalities. Ultimately, such mechanisms of power are not only about control but also about sustaining a system that benefits the few, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and limiting the possibility for genuine social mobility and change.

Furthermore, deals or agreement in economic and social contexts are often seen as a reflection of the underlying class dynamics in society (Marx, 1867). The dominant class, which owns the means of production, holds the upper hand in determining the terms and conditions of agreements, while the working class often faces exploitation through low wages, poor working conditions, or unfair benefits (Gramsci, 1971). The power structure in capitalist society reinforces economic and social inequality, making "deals" more beneficial to those who already hold power and resources (Poulantzas, 1978). Thus, a "deal" is not just about an agreement between individuals or entities, but also about the class power dynamics that shape the distribution of resources and power in society.

In this case, the writer found three examples of cases as well as the problem that became the issue of discussion. The first is the power relations between the liberal group and Donald Trump where he committed a violation, namely being involved in the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. In this case, there was verbal resistance between Donald Trump and liberals. The dominance by liberals of Donald Trump's control individually made him fail to obtain a second presidential term. In addition, in this case, he was indirectly disciplined to follow the rules that apply to his violation (CNN politics. 2024, February 1). This event underscores the inherent fragility of democratic systems when power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and how resistance is often necessary not just to challenge individual wrongdoings, but to confront systemic abuses of power. It reveals how political structures, while claiming to uphold justice, often operate in ways that reinforce existing power hierarchies, selectively applying laws and consequences to maintain the status quo.

The Second, Xi Jinping established a new anti-corruption agency, the National Supervision Commission, which replaced the State Council Supervision Ministry and merged with the party's Central Commission for Combating Corruption (CCDI). The move aims to strengthen the party's anti-corruption efforts in the non-party sector. The CCP has also stepped up efforts to infiltrate private sector businesses as well as foreign companies operating in China. We can assess, that Xi Jinping's policy is a form of discipline so that officials obey the rules not corruption so that the government system does not have problems that harm the country. Power relations in this case, control with rules is very striking where everyone as an official does not commit corruption that violates the law (Heath, T. R, 2019). Nevertheless, this approach raises questions about the real motivations behind such policies. While the anti-corruption initiative may appear beneficial on the surface, it could also serve as a tool for consolidating power by targeting political rivals and controlling both the private and public sectors under the guise of fighting corruption. The expansion of state power into private businesses and foreign enterprises further suggests a strategy to increase state influence at the cost of economic freedom and competition.

Power relation issue not only happened in real life but also in literary work such as novel. A novel, as a literary form, often explores the complexities of human relationships, societal structures, and the underlying power dynamics that shape individuals' actions and decisions. Through its characters, plot, and themes, a novel provides a lens to examine how power is exercised, resisted, or manipulated in various contexts, shedding light on the interplay between personal agency and larger social forces. The novel portrays how power dynamics influence not only the public sphere but also the private lives of those caught in its web, illustrating the profound impact of conflict and reconciliation on personal and collective identities. The way these characters deal with power relations often reveals critical insights into how authority operates and how individuals navigate their positions within it. Whether through acts of resistance, negotiation, or transformation, literature captures the many strategies humans employ to survive and assert agency within oppressive or unequal structures. Consequently, the novel becomes a reflective and interpretive space where existing power dynamics can be examined, deconstructed, and reimagined, allowing readers to critically engage with the realities of structural inequality and the possibilities of individual or collective agency.

Colum McCann's novel *Apeirogon* (2020) is selected as the object of this study due to its thematic and structural richness in portraying the complexities of power relations within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The novel, while inspired by real-life events, transcends mere fictionalization to offer a profound reflection on how power operates in everyday life whether through state institutions, ideological constructions, or interpersonal dynamics shaped by political and cultural identities. One of the distinctive features of *Apeirogon* lies in its experimental and non-linear narrative structure, the novel illustrates power relations not only through visible mechanisms such as state authority and military presence, but also through personal trauma, historical memory, the control of narratives, and the struggle to create cross-border dialogue. These dimensions make *Apeirogon* particularly relevant for analysis using power relation theories especially within the framework of Foucault's (1995) conception of power as diffuse, omnipresent, and embedded in everyday practices, as well as the insights of other critical theorists. Therefore, the choice of this novel is considered appropriate and significant for investigating how power is represented, confronted, and negotiated within a narrative space that traverses cultural, political, and emotional boundaries.

Based on the discussion above, the writer is therefore interested in conducting a study entitled "*Exploring the Dynamics of Power Relations in Colum McCann's novel Apeirogon*". This

study aims to critically examine the portrayal of power dynamics within the novel, focusing on how the characters navigate, respond to, and challenge the power structures embedded in their lives. Through an analysis of the novel's narrative techniques and thematic content, this study will explore how power operates at both the macro; societal and political and micro; personal and emotional levels. By employing power relation theories, particularly those that conceptualize power as relational, pervasive, and embedded in everyday life, the study seeks to uncover how these dynamics shape the characters' identities, actions, and relationships. Ultimately, the study aimed to find out :

- 1) How are the dynamics of power relations depicted in the novel in the *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann?
- 2) How do the characters present a critical reaction to power relations in the novel *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, the writer discusses the theory of Power Relations on the issue to be explored. Foucault's (1995) theory describes Power and Knowledge that often occur in the social body. He said "Power is not a thing, but a relation and power operates at the most micro levels of social relations. Power is omnipresent at every level of the social body" (Foucault M., 2003). So, from Foucault's point of view, we cannot clearly define what power is because power is not a thing but a relation that spreads throughout the social body. It works through various social, economic, family, gender, and many more relationships to form strong power relations covering all elements and accessing people's behavior.

In other words, power relations are reactions from one party to actions taken by different parties to form an action-reaction process, as Foucault wrote (Foucault M., Power/Knowledge: Wacana Kuasa/Pengetahuan., 2002). Regarding power relations constituting "a set of actions upon other actions." In "The Subject and Power" (2002), Foucault writes that the application of power is not as simple as the relationship between "partners" but rather the way one person acts towards another. Furthermore, concerning the application of power, Foucault (2002) mentions freedom as an essential element. Freedom is a crucial element in the exercise of power.

Power can only be applied to a free subject or as long as the subject is free. In "The Subject and Power" (Foucault M., The Subject and Power, 1982), Foucault writes about the points used in analyzing power relations. Some points include forms of institutionalization, the system of differentiations, the types of objectives, and instrumental modes. Foucauldian perspective, society and power relation and resistance cannot be detached, there is a relationship of mutual dependence between the two of them. Foucault rejects the idea that power is possessed by institutions. It is not always depicted on how the powerful one oppresses the powerless, rather Foucault sees power as a process of interaction among people in society, including institutions within it (Ballan,2013). Foucault underlines several key points regarding the characteristics of power.

The concept of power is crucial for understanding how power operates in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. According to Michel Foucault (1980), power is not something possessed by one party alone, but rather a complex and dynamic relationship that can operate through various mechanisms, such as knowledge, norms, and institutions. Additionally, Antonio Gramsci (1971) emphasized the importance of ideology and culture in maintaining power, while Max Weber (1947) defined power as the ability to influence others' behavior and emphasized the importance of legitimacy. Steven Lukes (2005) also identified three dimensions of power, namely power as decision-making, agenda-setting, and preference-shaping. Power can be seen as a complex and

dynamic relationship that influences identity, behavior, and social relations in the context of the Israel- Palestine conflict. Through this analysis, it can be understood how power operates in society and how resistance can become a strategy for changing existing power structures. The concept of power has also evolved into more nuanced discussions, one of which is the theory of power relations.

Power and knowledge are intertwined, with knowledge produced in the context of and reinforcing power. Through disciplinary mechanisms such as surveillance within institutions, power regulates individual behavior, with the Panopticon as the primary metaphor. This surveillance creates an internal discipline in which individuals regulate themselves because they feel they are being watched. Foucault also emphasizes that in any power relationship, there is always resistance, which can take different forms.

The dynamics of power relations in Michel Foucault's thought, particularly in his work "Discipline and Punish" (1975), focuses on how power operates in society, not only through coercion or violence, but also through more subtle mechanisms such as surveillance, discipline, and normalization.

Foucault (1995) explains that power is not only top-down (as in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled), but is also distributed throughout the social network. Power relations are dynamic and move in multiple directions. First is Surveillance and the Panopticon, Foucault uses the concept of the panopticon, a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham, as a metaphor to describe the way surveillance works in modern society. In the panopticon, prisoners always feel that they are being watched, even though there is not always someone directly watching. This sense of being watched creates a disciplinary effect in which individuals regulate their behavior according to prevailing norms. Second is discipline, Foucault (1995) explains that modern power operates through discipline applied to the bodies of individuals. This is done through institutions such as schools, hospitals, the military, and prisons, where individuals are trained to obey social rules and norms. This discipline is not only physical, but also mental, directing individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions. Third is Normalization, Foucault also highlights how power creates norms that are considered 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Individuals are encouraged to adhere to these standards, and those who deviate from the norm are considered "abnormal" and are often ostracized or forced to conform. Fourth is Productive Power, One of Foucault's (1995) innovations was to see power not only as oppressive but also as productive. Power produces knowledge, truth, and identity. In power relations, the subject is not only the object of control but also plays an active role in the production and reproduction of power. The characters experiences multiple forms of power relations that reflect the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

3. METHOD

The descriptive qualitative approach was applied in this study. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative study is a process of study based on different perspectives that seek out methodological traditions that explore social or human issues, in the sense that the study can construct complex images, analyze words, and report detailed views and information, and at the same time conduct study in natural environments. This means this approach is not presented as numbers or calculations. The data of this study were taken from a literary novel entitled *Exploring the Dynamic Power Relation*. This novel tells the story of Struggle and the power relation experienced by the main character for his oppression and family. Which is a basis for discrimination in various forms of violence. This novel was published February 25, 2020 issue. The writer chose this book because the story depicts power relations.

The writer used several steps in collecting data to analyze the novel entitled *Exploring the Dynamic of Power Relations*. Firstly, the writer read the novel several times to understand the whole story completely. Secondly, the writer identified the sentences and dialogues that were used to present stigma issues accurately. Thirdly, the writer marked the data based on Michel Foucault's (1983) theory of the concept of power. Lastly, the writer classified, determined, and organized the data related to stigma issues in a clear and structured manner.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social and Cultural Power by Michael Foucault (1975) was described in the social and cultural norms that govern the characters' behavior. Society internalizes these norms, and through daily practices, individuals are disciplined to act according to social expectations. This creates a subtle but effective form of power in which the characters feel bound by a social set of rules that are unwritten but highly influential. Foucault (1975) sees discipline as a technique of power used to regulate and control individual behavior through a series of subtle but highly effective mechanisms. Discipline is applied through institutions such as schools, hospitals, factories, and the military, where individuals are taught to follow certain rules and norms. Through the process of surveillance, timing, and the inculcation of norms, individuals are molded into obedient and productive bodies. Foucault emphasizes that discipline works in a way that is not necessarily directly repressive, but by systematically shaping an individual's behavior and mind. (Foucault, 1975, p.135-194).

The following is the first quotation to illustrate how discipline is not only applied through physical violence or punishment but through more subtle means, such as social norms and rules that shape an individual's body and behavior. "It flushed him with fear that he might appear fraudulent, theatrical, rehearsed. As if his story was a brand, a commercial, bound to repetition. He could feel the heat rise in his face. His palms grew sweaty. On the second or third telling in a day, he found himself pinching the skin on his forearms to jolt himself awake, to make sure, he wasn't retreading old territory. (McCann, 2020, 89-90 p.45)

The Paragraph, "It flushed him with fear that he might appear fraudulent, theatrical, rehearsed. As if his story was a brand, a commercial, bound to repetition." Rami was worried that the story was becoming too repetitive as if it was just a show being staged over and over again. And the sentence "He could feel the heat rise in his face. His palms grew sweaty." On the second or third telling in a day, he found himself pinching the skin on his forearms to jolt himself awake, to make sure, he wasn't retreading old territory." This illustrates how Rami tries to maintain freshness and originality in telling his story, even though he has to repeat the same story many times. This can be seen as an attempt to control and discipline oneself so as not to get stuck in routine or boredom. In Foucault's (1975) disciplinary context, this indicates an individual's attempt to adhere to social norms and expectations despite the gruelling repetition, suggesting an internalized self-control that leads to the formation of a "docile body." "There was nothing theatrical about it at all. He could make of it whatever heaven or hell he wanted. He settled into the repetition: it was his blessing and his curse. (McCann, 2020, 89-90 p.45)

The quote, "He settled into the repetition: it was his blessing and his curse." Rami eventually accepts the fact that he has to constantly repeat the same story. This can be seen as a form of self-adjustment to the disciplinary mechanism at work in which he not only repeats the story but also complies with the norms that require him to talk about his tragedy. In the theory of Foucault (1975), this is an example of how individuals can accept repetition as part of their identity formed by social norms and external expectations. All of these sections illustrate how discipline works in

Rami's life. This discipline operates in the form of repetition and behavioral control, both from the outside (society's expectations) and the inside (Rami's fear of becoming "too practised" at telling stories). Foucault sees discipline not only as physical control but also as a process of internalizing norms and self-surveillance, which is very relevant to the experience described in the excerpt. "The country was, he told them, written on a tiny canvas. Israel could fit inside New Jersey. The West Bank was smaller than Delaware. Four Gazas could be shoehorned inside London. One hundred Israels could be placed inside Argentina and you'd still have some room for the pampas. (McCann, 2020, 89-90 p.45)

The paragraph, "The country was, he told them, written on a tiny canvas. Israel could fit inside New Jersey. The West Bank was smaller than Delaware. Four Gazas could be shoehorned inside London. One hundred Israels could be placed inside Argentina and you'd still have some room for the pampas." This sentence illustrates how Rami uses geographical comparisons to convey the message in a very specific and structured way. The representation of these facts in a very measured and repetitive way reflects an attempt to make the message clear and easily understood by the listener, which could be considered part of the discipline's attempt to shape the way people hear and receive information. "In a garden. In Jerusalem. With a white band in her hair. She had learned to walk a certain way, speak a certain way, and think a certain way, all dictated by the expectations of society. (McCann, 2020, 89-90 p.45)

The last sentence in the quote "learned to walk a certain way, speak a certain way, and think a certain way" and "dictated by the expectations of society" first, illustrate how discipline is shaped by the social norms that govern the characters daily behavior. The character has been taught to behave according to society's expectations, even in small things like how to walk. This shows how power works through the internalization of social norms that shape individual behavior without the need for direct coercion. This discipline creates individuals who adhere to social rules, making them part of the order desired by power. This sentence shows how social norms can be very effective in shaping and controlling behavior. The quote illustrates how individuals, in this case Smadar, do not just learn to meet personal or family expectations, but rather the broader social norms that govern their behavior. Power is not obvious, but it exists in every aspect of social life, regulating what is considered right or wrong, good or bad.

This reflects Foucault's theory of how individuals are shaped by the social power that exists around them and how discipline works to normalize behavior through subtle but constant surveillance and control. Foucault (1995) argues that an individual's body is not natural, but rather influenced and shaped by society. In this case, the way individuals walk, talk and think is not solely the result of personal decisions, but rather the result of a social process in which individuals are taught to behave according to existing norms. The discipline serves to form an "obedient body" through repetition and behavioral control. "He settled into the repetition: it was his blessing and his curse. He spoke to academics, to artists, to schoolkids, to Israelis, to Palestinians, to Germans, to the Chinese, whoever would listen. Christian groups. Swedish scientists. Christian groups. Swedish scientists. South African police delegations. (McCann, 2020, 89-90 p.45)

The third sentence, "It was his blessing and his curse. He spoke to academics, to artists, to schoolkids, to Israelis, to Palestinians, to Germans, to the Chinese, whoever would listen." Rami feels that speaking in front of people from different backgrounds is both a blessing and a curse. In the context of Foucault's discipline, this illustrates how Rami is constantly in a position where he is expected to speak and repeat his story. This is part of the social control that forces individuals to constantly adapt to external demands. That Rami has to comply with society's expectations of his role as a speaker or storyteller, shows how discipline operates in directing individual behavior.

Moving forward to the next quotation. Due to obeying rules without question. "From a young age, they were taught to obey, to follow the rules without question. When he was thirteen he hoisted a flag in the school playground: green, red, black, white. Just to piss the soldiers off. So, he could throw stones at them when they came to tear it down. To see the cords in their necks tighten. To have them blaze around the corner, jolting to a halt although. (McCann, 2020, 206 p.92)

The sentence "From a young age, they were taught to obey, to follow the rules without question" reflects the application of discipline in the form of teaching obedience from an early age. This is to Foucault's concept of discipline as a process of forming individuals who are obedient to social norms and power, which often works through the internalization of these values. The second, "Just to piss the soldiers off. So, he could throw stones at them when they came to tear it down. To see the cords in their necks tighten. To have them blaze around the corner, jolting to a halt although". This appears to be an act of rebellion or resistance, it can be seen as a response to the application of strong discipline from the the writer (in this case, the army). Foucault (1995) talks about how power and discipline often work in invisible and indirect ways, but the individual affected by this power, while seemingly rebelling, is still within the sphere of control. Here, this young man is trying to resist in a purely self-defeating way to prove himself against power, but the act is still a response to the existing order and control.

In Foucault's (1995) theory, power operates in subtle ways, not only through apparent rules but also in the form of indirect influence on individual actions and choices. Even in this kind of resistance-throwing stones to provoke the individual is still within a larger system of power. Such actions, while appearing to be a form of rebellion, are, in fact, a form of response to injustice enforced through social discipline and external control. "What he liked most of all was the sound of the Jeep tires when they ploughed past the school gates. Not the soldiers any more, not the vehicle, not the guns, just the noise of the spinning tyres: there was something hungry about them. The sounds of his boyhood." (McCann, 2020, 206 p.92)

The words, "What he liked most of all was the sound of the Jeep tires when they ploughed past the school gates. Not the soldiers any more, not the vehicle, not the guns, just the noise of the spinning tyres: there was something hungry about them". Attention to the sound of the Jeep's spinning tires can be seen as a form of awareness of the power that continues to watch and control, even though the presence of soldiers or weapons is no longer the focus. Foucault mentions that power is not always physically visible, but is also present in the form of symbols and signs that are constantly present, reminding individuals of the existence of continuous control. The sound of the Jeep's tires can be seen as a symbol of the lurking and controlling presence of power, although it is not immediately visible or felt.

5. CONCLUSION

The dynamics of power relations in *Apeirogon* are depicted as intricate and pervasive, operating through various forms such as institutional, symbolic, and ideological power. The novel situates Rami and Bassam within the broader context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where power is exercised through military, political, and legal institutions. These forms of power regulate behavior, restrict movement, and reinforce national and ideological boundaries. The narrative reflects Steven Lukes' three-dimensional model of power, illustrating the dynamics of decision-making, agenda-setting, and the subtle exercise of ideological control and ideological power shape both the characters' external circumstances and their internal struggles. Foucault's (1995) concept of power as productive

as well as repressive is also prominent, with power not only imposing restrictions but also shaping social norms and personal identities.

As for how the characters react to these dynamics of power, both Rami and Bassam engage in acts of resistance, negotiation, and redefinition. They resist the dominant narratives imposed by both Israeli and Palestinian national ideologies by participating in the Parents Circle – Families Forum, an organization that promotes dialogue between bereaved families from both sides of the conflict. This form of cultural resistance, aligned with Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony, allows them to challenge the prevailing discourse of revenge and violence. Furthermore, their efforts to reclaim symbolic power through personal storytelling and public advocacy reflect Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital. Through these actions, they not only confront the external power structures that seek to define them but also transform their grief into a force for political change and peacebuilding (Bourdieu, 1986). *Apeirogon* portrays power relations as complex, multifaceted, and deeply embedded in the social, political, and ideological fabric of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the characters demonstrate that resistance to power is possible even within such an entrenched system. Their actions reflect the interconnection between power and resistance, showing that individuals can challenge, negotiate, and reframe the power structures that shape their lives.

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