

# The Creative Launcher

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## Ethics of Power Dismantled: A Reading of Meira Chand's *A Choice of Evils*

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### Abstract

The exercise of power in a society is accepted as endemic to humans as social beings. The principles of order and control are essential for the proper functioning of any social system to affect the desired outcome. Michael Foucault has conceived power as the ability to create change in society or in the behavior of individuals, be it positive or negative. Power, "a practice of self" as Foucault calls it, must be exercised with ethics. Meira Chand is a South East Asian woman writer who has penned eight novels. She was born and educated in London. She spent much of her adult life in Japan and India and now resides in Singapore. She is one of Singapore's most well known literary writers. She specializes in accurate and well researched historical novels. Her novels such as *A Choice of Evils*, *A Far Horizon* and *A Different Sky* deal with the evils of war and how it affects the lives of a disparate group of fictional characters. This paper attempts to examine how power structures influence the lives of common people particularly during major wars fought in history. The paper also tries to expose how the exercise of power has negatively affected the lives of a massive group of common men. The paper also argues that Meira Chand's fiction has spanned through history questioning the authority of power creating negative reverberations in the lives of innocent people.

**Keywords-** *Power, History, Violence of War, Historical novel*

Power as a sociological concept can be defined innumerable, say in hundreds or thousands of ways. One of the older or simpler definitions of power can be that it is the ability to control people or things. Bertrand Russell has defined it as the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others. In this simple definition it is clear that the exercise of power has an intention and is concerned with effectiveness. According to Stanley Benn power in its essence, turns out to be an encroachment into another person's freedom of choice, movement and actions. Benn elaborates on the intention behind the exercise of power and about the successful achievement of the intention. Power is conceived as aiming at the

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effective functioning of a society. This effective functioning itself is the intention of power. In my paper my attempt is to question whether this intention is successfully achieved through the exercise of power, with reference to the novels of Meira Chand.

World has faced the tyranny of dictatorial power especially during the Second World War. Those terror filled years stands proof to the fact that beyond a certain extend power becomes destructive and an end in itself. The torture inflicted by the agents of power on its subjects become its sole manifestation and sadism its effect. Meira Chand's *A Choice of Evils* illustrates this as the historical novel presents the public torture inflicted upon a group of fictional characters and spans through the historical events that happened during the Second World War. Throughout the novel Meira Chand reiterates the destructive aspect of power, the majority submitting itself to the rule of minority. It is all because the social concept of power holds a negative perspective that the minority is entitled to rule or that it is liable to suffer in case of disobedience.

One of the most influential thinkers of recent years who pronounced his ideas regarding power is Michel Foucault. His work on freedom, subjectivity and power is now central to thinking across an extraordinarily wide range of disciplines including philosophy, history, psychology, politics, anthropology, sociology and criminology. Foucault's treatment of power, does not operate with a negative view of it But he does not deny that negative aspect of power exists. His novel aspect of disciplinary power is different from the earlier forms of power, which I mentioned earlier. The earlier forms stressed on bodily manipulation, which were violent and often performative: public torture, slavery and hanging. Foucault's concept of power is more akin to the individual or the body. According to him, disciplinary power does not subject the body to extreme violence, but through detailed training reconstructs the body to produce new kinds of gestures, habits and skills. Individuals literally incorporate the objectives of power, which become part of their own being: actions, aims and habits

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, he illustrates that supreme power being vested in one individual, when wielded repressively over another or others become inept in a society which has changed socially, politically and economically. For example certain modes of punishment during the time of monarchy no longer had the desired effect on the public instead invoked people's rage against king's authority, thereby promoting social and political unrest. In an interview entitled "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual", Foucault explains:

It's clear that power should not be defined as a constraining act of violence that represses individuals, forcing them to do something or preventing them from doing some other thing. But it takes place when there is a relation between two subjects, and this relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon

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the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon.  
(*History of the Present 2*)

For Foucault power is productive and power is omnipresent that is power can be found in all social interactions. These social interactions or 'force relations' seems to be the basic unit in this approach to power. Very broadly, force relations consists of whatever in one's social interactions that pushes, urges or compels one to do something. Power thus becomes a complex arrangement of forces in society or a multiplicity of force relations. It even shapes our choices of how to dress on a daily basis.

It is equally important to note Foucault's observation that 'there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives'. (*The History of Sexuality* 94-5) In *Discipline and Punish* his analysis of power 'presupposes that power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy'. Foucault refers to the aims and objectives of power as 'tactics' and 'strategies', and notes that these are what constitute its 'rationality'. Power develops in specific, local, individual choices, behaviors and interactions which combine in myriad ways to constitute large social patterns, and eventually yield macro forms, which one typically thinks about 'power' (societies, states, kings). Foucault always argues for the importance of micro events, with their ripples and interactions, in order to understand macro phenomena and such micro events or local events control will always be limited and incomplete. Foucault's distinction between tactics and strategy parallels this micro/macro distinction. Tactics are local, micro and concerned with individual choices whereas strategies are macro, systematic and concerned with state laws.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is concerned with individuals. It strives to make the individual more obedient and more useful. Foucault writes, 'discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise'. The advantage of disciplinary power over other modes of power is that it intensively and continuously endeavors to control the activities of bodies and at the same time there develops a strong relationship between utility and docility of individuals, whereby increase in utility correspond to increase in docility and vice versa. This results in an increase of skills and aptitudes of bodies without at the same time any question of resistance to disciplinary power. It creates an individuality in bodies which is distinct from others. This cellular form of individuality encloses them in a space different from all others which breaks up collective activities and hence reduces the risk of resistance among them against power. This individuality is 'organic' and responds spontaneously and naturally to the disciplinary practices. In historical terms, Foucault sketches the shift from a society in which disciplinary power played only a marginal role (prior to sixteenth century) to a society in which it played a predominant role (starting with eighteenth century). With the widespread application of disciplinary power in the society, the question of subjectivity becomes relevant where it is not

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denied that the subjects or individuals have the freedom of choice even if those choices are controlled, conditioned and limited by the strategic situation or space in which the individuals find themselves. The fundamental question for ethical action has much to do with the individual's ability to make decisions that are not 'merely' determined by the relations of power in which they emerge, or it is a question of freedom.

The traditional concept of freedom concerns the metaphysical aspect of it. It is a question of whether the mind can control the body. This metaphysical freedom is related to the doctrine of determinism, which is the view that human being are in control of none of their actions and thoughts. Those who believe in metaphysical freedom deny that human life is entirely determined. Proceeding from the traditional concept of freedom to Foucauldian concept of freedom it is clear that he neither denies nor defends metaphysical freedom. He is more concerned with the question of specific constraints that are part of our historical legacy, which acts upon the individuals. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault makes a historical analysis of the rise of prisons where through techniques of surveillance and intervention merges into a closed environment of a prison. There the criminals are molded into 'docile bodies' and are efficient in performance and obedient to authority. These techniques diffused throughout society where families and individuals are constantly exposed to psychological monitoring ensuring conformity to appropriate social roles. Foucault labels this as 'discipline'. They do not stop people from doing something instead they create people to be certain kind of way, trains our bodies to be oriented towards particular kinds of behavior. It blunts the possibility of social resistance. According to the traditional metaphysical concept of freedom we can control our thoughts and behavior devoid of any outside force. But in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault recounts a force outside of us that is influencing how we think and how we act. He describes this force with the view that if we understand our situation then we have a chance at changing it which in fact embraces the idea of metaphysical freedom. According to Foucault, the exercise of power begins when the subjects are free or when both subjects have a certain form of liberty.

For Foucault power works through culture and customs, institutions and individuals. Likewise, its effects are not simply negative of positive, but productive. They are both positive and negative, unstable valuations that can be reversed through history. In this paper my endeavor is to show that when the historical progression of the exercise of power is analyzed it can be understood that these ethics are totally dismantled, which is well illustrated in Meira Chand's *A Choice of Evils*.

Meira Chand is a south East Asian woman writer who has to her credit a long and solid career as a novelist. Thirty Six years has passed since the publication of her first novel *The Gossamer Fly*. Her latest novel *A Different Sky* (2010) is set against the backdrop of pre independence Singapore. She is a novelist born in London of Indian and Swiss descent. Her

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father is a Punjabi. After living in both India and Japan, she currently resides in Singapore and majority of her novels are based in India and Japan. She specializes in accurate and well researched historical novels. She has penned eight novels of which *A Far Horizon*, *A Different Sky* and *A Choice of Evils* center around some of the major wars in world history.

The background of *A Choice of Evils* is Sino-Japanese war from early 1930's till the end of Second World War. Japan's Imperial Army with its strong militaristic power colonize Chinese capital city of Nanking and sacked Chiang Kai Shek, Nanking's head. Chinese people suffer a lot under Japanese army. The novel is an appealing account of how a group of people become mere puppets in the hands of dictatorial power. The novel traces the lives of seven primary characters who are subjected to different experiences. These characters mix with a horde of historical characters and are brought together by the dislocation of war. At the onset of the novel the author traces how Prince Hirohito was given rigorous training from childhood to be moulded as the Emperor of Japan, a country which was aspiring to be the ruler of the world. A vision of Japan as the premier force in the world was instilled in Hirohito. Everywhere Hirohito had restraints upon him. This in effect is the essence of power. Hirohito's individuality is being transformed to adapt itself to the Japanese mission of a united Asia under their control. Also Hirohito was not being trained according to his own wish which can be considered as an encroachment into another person's freedom of choice, movements and actions.

The intention behind this mission of power was genuine-the royal judgement for the good of the nation. Hirohito was thus imparted with the mythological vision of a united Asia under Japanese leadership in order to free Asia from western bondage- the cherished vision of Hakko Ichiu. Hakko Ichiu meant the bringing together of the eight corners of the universe under the roof of Japan. It was from this dream of Japanese royalty that the whole course of acquisition progressed. As Japan's Sword of Power was waged the vision of Hakko Ichiu had become a megalomaniacal symbol of world domination through military power. Realizing the weight of war, Hirohito wanted to turn back but the vision of Hakko Ichiu superseded all other considerations.

Power is essential for the effective functioning of any society but when it attains the level of absolute power, it becomes destructive. This novel tries to prove this as it traces the lives of a disparate group of fictional characters. One such character is a Japanese soldier, Akira Murata. During the time of war, he was not feeling well at the military camp. He was depressed at the uselessness of war.

The tiredness drained his memory. He could no longer recall the things he had done, the times he had pulled a trigger and seen a man slump to his knees. The thrust into a belly with his bayonet was no more now than splicing a sack of grain. He walked in a dream. He could not laugh with the others, urinating

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over corpses, but turned away. They nicknamed him Snowdrop for his bend head. (*A Choice of Evils* 258)

As his depression grew up one night he escaped from the military camp, he found a corpse on the way, whose clothes were still in usable order. He undressed his military uniform and boots and pulled on the dead man's rags. Now he was no longer Japanese. He escaped from his identity as a Japanese soldier obeying those at the top- against the cruelty of power.

Throughout the novel it's the negative aspect of power being unleashed. A dream vision which was intended for a fulfillment of a royal mission which was genuine in its core ended up in total misery. Absolute power gains a vulgar phase as it spread its roots in society. *A Choice of Evil* forcefully asserts that power is evil when it transcends a certain limit.

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