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## A Foucauldian Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*: A Poststructuralist Perspective

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### Abstract

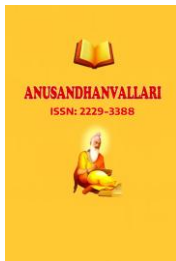
Post structuralism took literature in a whirlwind by shaking its foundational theories and implementing new ideas that there is no fixed or singular meaning of a work, but constructed socially and are unstable. Michael Foucault, a key figure in post structuralism, was an eye-opener in the realm of power relation, knowledge & discourse. His concepts stood the test of time and are relevant up to the modern times. Henrik Ibsen, the father of modern drama, challenged conventions and customs in his plays. A Foucauldian analysis of literature helps in deconstructing power or knowledge and investigating discursive formations. This paper aims to bring out the power dynamics and structures that govern the society in the play through a poststructuralist perspective.

**Keywords:** - Michael Foucault, Post Structuralism, Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*

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Post structuralism brought a revolution in challenging long established ideas such as fixed meanings and identities. It shook the stability of traditional notions with its emphasis on ambiguity and the role of the readers. Michael Foucault, the French historian and philosopher established a landmark for himself in post structuralism by his unique analysis of the inexplicable link between power and knowledge. His narratives focused on the influence of discourse and institutions in defining truth and how they imply surveillance were new and made people rethink the earlier interpretations. Foucauldian analysis of literature transformed literary criticism which previously focused on the study of meaning and attached superiority to author to an in-depth analysis of how literary texts produce and sustain power structures and influence the perception of the society and decentering the focus on author's function than author's psychology. So, analyzing a literary work through a Foucauldian lens is sure to offer new insights to the society.

Post structuralism was an outburst against the preconceived notions of fixed meaning and representing structures by emphasizing the instability of language. This movement emerged in France during the 1960s-1970s. Key thinkers include Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva etc. Michael Foucault is a leading poststructuralist thinker whose theories on the relationship between power and knowledge struck the society with its harsh hitting reality and ingenuity. The essay 'Truth and Power' was actually an interview and it belongs to the transitional phase of Foucault's career. During this period, he engaged himself with analysing how power, discourse and knowledge are related to one another and how they shape institutions and truths. His examination of institutions like prisons, clinics and schools made him conclude that these institutions influence the formation of knowledge and social order. In this essay, he rejected the Enlightenment notion of universal truth and instead presented truth as dependent upon power structures. He brought out the concept of 'regimes of truth'



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in society. He felt that truth as well as knowledge were produced by dominant social and political forces and thereby challenged the assumptions and authority of knowledge production and power. His essays have left an indelible influence in all spheres of post structuralism, critical theory and cultural studies.

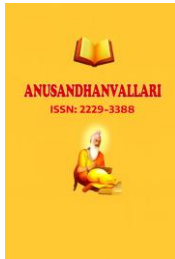
Henrik Ibsen, the revolutionary dramatist of the modern era, earned the epithet Father of Modern Drama due to his exploration of radical and hitherto untouched ideas in his plays which were in revolt against the notions of authority, democracy, position of women, production of truth etc. His *An Enemy of the People* is a direct attack against the power structures and the basis of democracy that the will of the majority rules the country. Also, it exposes how truth operates under power structures and how these power structures decide what is truth and who can speak it. The protagonist Dr. Stockmann is an example of resistance who challenged the dominant majority. Further, the authorities and the townspeople's surveillance of Dr. Stockmann and how the authorities control and regulate the lives of others by their decisions all align with the concepts of Foucault in 'Truth and Power'.

The protagonist Dr. Thomas Stockmann was a medical officer. His brother Peter Stockmann was the Mayor of the town. He examined the Baths in the town and discovered that the spas were contaminated with bacteria and it would affect all who bathe in it. But, the authorities didn't welcome his findings as the Baths were their good source of revenue, so they didn't want to lose it. They thought of ways to suppress Dr. Stockmann. In the beginning a few supported Dr. Stockmann, but soon they took back due to the pressure of Mayor. Dr. Stockmann believed that the townspeople would understand him and arranged a meeting to tell the public about the danger in the Baths. But Peter Stockmann entered there and cleverly manipulated the people by saying that if the Baths were closed, they had to pay extra taxes. On hearing this, people went against him and started throwing stones at him. His house was destroyed and his daughter lost her job. His sons were sent out of the school. Initially, he decided to leave the town, but then he came to the conclusion that he should start a school there and guide the future generation in the right path.

The play *An Enemy of the People* is a novel application of Foucault's concept of Power Truth Nexus. Foucault holds that truth is dependent on power and the dominant forces of the society decide what can be accepted as truth and who can talk on it. Also institutions like schools, courts and science favour the dominant forces by upholding what they hold as truth. On the whole, power and knowledge are intertwined and power constructs truth.

In this play, the authorities took constant efforts to suppress Dr. Stockmann's findings. Peter Stockmann, his own brother and Mayor of the town urged him to leave the matter as it would cost huge sum of money. He then threatened him to give up his findings publicly, but Dr. Stockmann was not afraid and he refused. Finally, he dismissed Dr. Stockmann from the post of medical officer, but Dr. Stockmann didn't yield to him. When Dr. Stockmann decided to publish his findings in the newspaper, Peter Stockmann went to the newspaper office and told the editors that if they printed the article, it would result in levying additional taxes and would ruin the economy of the town. They were taken aback and henceforth the authorities successfully suppressed the truth by suppressing the media too. They also manipulated the people by telling the same thing and turned the whole townsfolk against Dr. Stockmann and so Dr. Stockmann's couldn't establish the truth. The behaviour of the authorities is a vivid illustration of the concept of Truth and Power nexus of Foucault. The Municipal authorities skilfully concealed the truth and also tried to silence Stockmann from speaking about it. The media also turned in favour of themselves. The authorities also promoted their version of truth that the Baths were a triumph of the town and hosted it was necessary for them to develop their economic condition. Henceforth Foucault's assertion that truth is dependent on power is portrayed explicitly too in the play.

Those in power dictate things in favor of them and promote them as truth while Dr. Stockmann's findings with scientific evidence are overlooked. This incident is a powerful illustration of Foucault's concept that truth is produced by dominant forces and not discovered.



The character of Dr. Stockmann is an example of resistance concept of Foucault. According to Foucault, resistance is a force that opposes dominant forces and their narratives. Here, Dr. Stockmann didn't yield to the pressure of the authorities. Peter Stockmann's threatenings, his dismissal from the post of medical officer, withdrawal of the support of the press and townspeople's enmity against him, their hurls and insults, calling him as an enemy of the people, vandalization of his house, dismissal of Petra from the job of teacher, expulsion of his sons from the School, Mortenkil's offer of shares in Baths, all these things could not deter him or retract him from his findings. He stood alone in the end but he proclaimed courageously that the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone. He decided to start a school and inculcate forward thinking to the future generations. Neither money nor threatening could break his resistance. Henceforth, Dr. Stockmann is an apt example of Foucault's idea of resistance.

In addition, Foucault's panopticism can also be found in the play. Panopticism means the constant surveillance of the authorities to exercise their control over the people. Here Peter Stockmann was monitoring Dr. Stockmann and found out that he gave an article to the newspaper and silenced them. Also, he smelled out the meeting and spoiled it by his cunning way of manipulating the majority. By his surveillance, he suppressed the truth and maintained his control. So, the actions of Peter Stockmann represent how panopticism is rooted in the society.

Foucault's concept of bio-power finds an important place in the play. Bio-power refers to how power operates through the control of the bodies and lives of individuals through medicine, law etc. In the play, the authorities took control of the health of the townspeople by suppressing the report on baths. Eventhough Dr. Stockmann mentioned that the bacteria would harm the people, they were keen in getting profit from the baths than the health of the people. So, the behaviour of the authorities is a powerful instance of bio-power of the dominant forces.

To conclude, the play offers a rich and vivid illustration of Foucault's principles that he discussed in 'Truth and Power'. A post structural analysis of the play brought out the power dynamics operating in the societies. More and more such analysis will help all to know about the functioning of invisible power structures and domination in the society.

#### References: -

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