



Research Paper

## Sovereign Power: A Foucauldian Study of Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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### Abstract

Ram, the hero of Ramayana as well as God figure in Hinduism, is generally criticized as a husband. Analyzing some shortcomings of Sovereign Power in *The Forest of Enchantments*, the paper attempts to investigate the reasons behind Sita's banishments from a sovereign kingdom as it is the prominent reason for which Ram is criticized. Efforts have been made to study Ram's character in *The Forest of Enchantments* through Michel Foucault's concept of Sovereign Power. Ram's character has been analyzed from a different perspective which is usually neglected as the whole focus remains on the relationship between Ram and Sita. An attempt has been made to study the positive side of Ram based on Foucault's theory of power. It shows both, the negative as well as the positive sides of Sovereign Power through Ravan and Ram respectively. The aftermaths of using and misusing Sovereign Power are also focused. The paper provides a sense of novelty by redefining Ram's characteristics from Foucault's perspective.

**Key Words:** Michel Foucault, Sovereign Power, Theory of Power, Uses and Misuses of Sovereign Power, Indivisibility, Supreme Power, to take life or let live.

Received 25 Nov., 2023; Revised 05 Dec., 2023; Accepted 07 Dec., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

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Michel Foucault, a well-known philosopher as well as a critic, is best known for his theory of power. He defines power by categorizing it in different forms. Bio Power is his prominent concern. But before describing Bio Power he patently states that it is Sovereign Power which is the base of Bio Power. Bio Power emerges from Sovereign Power. So, the roots of every kind of power that Foucault introduces lie in Sovereign Power. Foucault deals with both, Sovereign as well as Bio Power, in his book *Discipline and Punish*. He does not talk directly about these forms of Power, rather, he presents his views regarding these forms of power through two different scenes. First scene belongs to the year 1757 and the second scene depicts the scenario after eight years. Both the scenes discuss about punishments in different manners. First punishment portrays scary and horrible execution. This execution is not an ordinary execution, rather, it is depicted as the cruelest punishment before the public. The criminal is slowly and gradually punished till he succumbs. So, one situation depicts cruelty of punishment while the other situation is contrary to it. The scenario after eight years illustrates the punishment given to criminals that is not harsh and brutal. It does not involve harsh or extreme physical pain in the second situation. Foucault talks about the activities made to perform by the criminals in prison in the second scenario. Through these activities the criminals learn to discipline themselves through their daily routine. The whole focus is on the everyday routine of criminals in prison in order to regulate their lives. The gesture, even in the second case, does not appear nice because it is also a form of punishment just in different way as Foucault states that it was not to punish less, but to punish better.

This way Foucault discusses two different situations having almost contrary scenarios of two different time periods. First description is about Sovereign Power and second defines regulation and discipline leading

towards Disciplinary Power and Bio Power. Talking about Sovereign Power in "Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault" Schulzke states: "The most basic type of power Foucault describes is overt, coercive domination by a single person or a group of people. Foucault identifies this type of power as that of a sovereign, who has personal control over government and the administration of justice" (58). So, in a nutshell, Sovereign Power is outlined as coercive domination. The domination by the ruler or the king makes him supreme power of a state. The king can take any decision about kingdom or its public. He also has the right to punish anyone from the state who disobeys him or breaks any rule of the state. Foucault calls it power of life and death. The King can punish a criminal in the most brutal ways or can have mercy for the criminal. In simple words, Sovereign Power deals with making of rules, giving commands and punishing those who do not follow these commands. So, it is all up to the king/ruler in sovereign kingdom.

*The Forest of Enchantments*, a novel by Divakaruni, published in 2019, also manifests Sovereign Power as it is based on the great Indian epic *Ramayana*. One of the key features of Sovereign Power is indivisibility as in "From Sovereignty to War: Foucault's Analytic of Power" Erlenbusch states "...it theorizes it on the model of classical sovereignty, that is, indivisible, absolute, and supreme power of a state" (1). There exists only one Sovereign Power in an independent state. If, anyhow, there exist two different Sovereign Powers, the state will fall apart as there will be no unity. As in *The Forest of Enchantments* the whole kingdom of Koshal is ruled only by King Dasharath and then by his son Ram. A major part of novel deals with the rule of King Dasharath whose kingdom is absolute and complete in itself as there is no interference of any other kingdom or king. Sovereign Power works as a unit, complete in itself just as Dasharath has his own helpers and *mantris* but all these people are organs of his own kingdom. Same can be seen in kingdom of Koshal. If any king from outside the kingdom tries to interfere or rule the state, the king fights for his kingdom. When *rakshasas* try to interfere and disturb the holy rituals of Koshal, King Dasharath sends Ram and Lakshman with Sage Vishwamitra to kill the *rakshasas* in which they succeed as well. So, any interference from outside is not allowed in sovereignty. In the same way, King Janak, father of Sita, rules Mithila and he is the highest authority there and similar is the role of Ravan in his Lanka. Ravan, like Dasharath and Janak, is also the highest authority or the ruler of his kingdom Lanka. Though Koshal, as a state, is more powerful as well as larger than Mithila but both are different states, and both have different sovereignty. Mithila, Koshal and Lanka, all are independent states and hence all have different kings as well as kingdoms which make each of these sovereign states according to the description of Foucault. If King Janak or Ravan try to rule Koshal with King Dasharath or vice versa, the kingdom will shatter as there will be two sovereign powers. Two sovereignties within one kingdom will lead to two different sets of ideas trying to rule the state in two different manners which is not feasible because it will create a discord in kingdom and its public.

Sovereignty is supreme power of a kingdom. No matter how powerful any person or a group is, sovereignty remains supreme. Supremacy of Sovereign Power in *The Forest of Enchantments* can be comprehended through the exile of Ram, King Dasharath's favourite son. This incident shows how even a son cannot escape from what the ruler of a kingdom orders. Kaikeyi, Dasharath's favourite wife, wants her own son Bharat to be coronated as the next ruler of the kingdom, but as Ram is the eldest son, Dasharath wants him to be the upcoming king. Ram becomes obstacle in Kaikeyi's plan, so in return of the boons promised by Dasharath for saving his life, she asks for Ram's exile of fourteen years and Bharat's coronation. King Dasharath, bound to his own words, cannot deny the wish of Kaikeyi, and Ram has to suffer for the promise made by his father, the king. Even the son of king cannot go against King's words.

Ram remains the beloved of public throughout the novel. When the public comes to know about Ram's exile, no one among them wants him to leave Ayodhya as the public sees the future of Ayodhya in Ram. When Ram, Lakshman and Sita come outside the palace to leave for forest, they face a huge crowd requesting them not to leave. "...but there was a crush of people outside, men and women, and even children, weeping and begging Ram not to leave... it was hard to get through the lamenters. Many tried to throw themselves under the chariot wheels to stop us, frenzied as they were with their fear of what would befall Ayodhya now that there was a change of regime" (Divakaruni 149). The whole public wants Ram to stop but public is as powerless as Ram is. Majority of public, being on one side to stop Ram, fails in all their efforts because of sovereignty. This way, universality of the sovereign power automatically becomes a significant aspect of sovereign state when one talks about supremacy. Being the supreme political authority, sovereignty cannot be challenged or disobeyed by anyone. Rules and regulations for the public, irrespective of class, caste or gender, are same. Sovereignty does not just limit itself to making of rules and regulations rather it stops one from doing things that can harm sovereignty in form of monopoly:

Sovereign power stops and limits certain behavior. Often this form of power involves a dramatic show of force, the use of examples, violent punishment and even extreme pain. It is the kind of power that does not accept any public dissent, or any show of loyalty to any other commanding center. It is the form of power that, if people accept it, will make sovereignty possible by claiming a monopoly of rule... (Lilja 7-8)

Foucault's Sovereign Power belongs directly to monopoly. There is no relaxation or exception for anyone in a sovereign state. Ram's exile given by his own father also validates the same as exception cannot be given even to a son if the ruler orders it.

Commands and supremacy are strongly connected, and it is clearly visible in the novel. Towards the end of Sita's abduction in the novel, command is given to Surpanakha by Queen Sarama, the wife of Vibheeshan, the new King of Lanka. Her wife, being the queen of the kingdom has Sovereign Power too and she uses it when Surpanakha comes to take her revenge when Ravan fails to do the same. When Ravan is killed and there remains no chance of Surpanakha's revenge to be taken, she herself comes to avenge. For a while Sita manages to save herself but after some time Sita starts failing in her efforts to defend herself. Sarama, intervenes at this moment, executing her Sovereign Power: "Surpanakha! What are you doing? Have you lost what little sense you had? I order you to stop" (Divakaruni 229). Surpanakha's reluctance at following the orders of someone she doesn't regard as a queen, forces the latter to impress upon Surpanakha her Power by gesturing for the guards. This is how Queen Sarama's Sovereign Power helps in protecting Sita.

Foucault's idea of Sovereign Power is a classical privilege "to take life or let live" (qtd. in Erlenbusch). According to Erlenbusch, "sovereignty manifests itself as a right to kill when the sovereign's existence is in danger" (1). Abandonment of Sita by her husband twice during the novel is no less than a death to her. She "dies" twice when her husband Ram forgets his duty towards her being concerned just about his kingdom and the public. After her abduction by Ravan, Ram faces abundant struggles to bring Sita back, but when he kills Ravan and sets Sita free, he finds himself bound to the duties of a king. Consequently, he is left with no choice but to refuse taking Sita back to Ayodhya. For Sita, as for any virtuous woman, it is akin to a symbolic death. Sita, shocked, tries to defend herself and tells Ram about her love for him. She adds that she is as pure as it was when she was with him in the forest. Ram reacts to this statement as:

What you say may well be true... But your words are not proof enough. Not for the citizens of Ayodhya. I cannot take back to them a queen whose virtue they'd question, whose purity they'd disbelieve. They will think that, like my father Dasharath, I swayed from the path of dharma, enchanted by a wife's charms. It will throw the entire kingdom in turmoil—and I cannot allow that to happen. I owe it to them. (Divakaruni 294-295)

Sita's life gets affected by Ram's decision taken out of sovereignty. Irrespective of the fact that Sita is his wife, he takes such a cruel step which shatters Sita's life. He finds his kingdom's moral values in danger. Being the king of the state, it becomes his responsibility to walk on the path of dharma because a king is always a role model for the public. The decision of not taking Sita back to Ayodhya is taken on the basis of Sovereign Power for the public of sovereign kingdom.

Ram repeats his decision towards the end of the novel when he again takes the decision of leaving Sita. He finds that people behind his back talk about him in a disrespectful manner because he is keeping Sita, who was abducted by another man. Though Sita already has given the trial by fire in order to be accepted by Ram, but it does not satisfy the public. Moreover, the men of the state consider Sita responsible for the "immoral" behavior and deeds done by their wives. One such incident takes place in the state where a washerman accuses his wife of unfaithfulness because she comes home after midnight with her friend's husband as her friend needed her help and emotional support during the childbirth. Sita, after knowing the truth, keeps that woman in the palace as she has been abandoned by her husband. After this incident, people start whispering and rumoring about Sita and her being pregnant. They also attack Ram's decision of taking an immoral wife back as they disbelieve the trial by fire. In addition to it, they get scared by the thought of wives not being submissive:

And how about our wives? They're going to start expecting the same kind of submissive behaviour from us. They'll be doing whatever they want, going wherever they want. Anything we say to them they'll shrug away, saying, if Ram can accept Sita after she lived with Ravan, surely you can put up with this little thing. Or do you think you're better than the King? (Divakaruni 378)

Any kind of breach in a sovereign kingdom can make it fall apart. Abandoning Sita is certainly an unkind act but analyzing this act from the perspective of a king reveals the other side, the side of an ideal king whose sole purpose is to think about the welfare of his public. Perhaps it becomes more necessary for him not to keep his wife who is considered "immoral" and "impure" by the public. In order to save the state from falling apart and save his own self from being disrespected in his own kingdom, it becomes Ram's responsibility to banish, from his kingdom, the only cause of all the problems: Sita.

Undoubtedly, Ram fails as a husband by leaving her virtuous and faithful wife twice but not banishing her from kingdom would have resulted into worse. Unlike Ravan, he does not think just about his own life by ignoring the public of his kingdom and their lives. Ram takes a reasonable as well as necessary decision which can make one raise questions on Ram as a husband but never as a king. So, the novel portrays Ram as a selfless as well as an ideal king of sovereign kingdom Ayodhya.

Sovereign Power includes law making and amending those laws as "Foucault presented the sovereign power as legislative, prohibitive and censoring; a power that primarily makes use of the law and law-like regulations" (qtd. in Lilja 5). It has the capability to prohibit one from taking a step which can create danger for

sovereignty and if the public or anyone from public does not accept it or does not follow the laws, sovereignty has power to use coercion. "Power transforms one into someone that does what the rulers say out of fear of being caught and punished. It creates subordinate subjects" (Lilja 8). Creating subordinate subjects is one of the most important features of Foucault's sovereignty. In Ravan's Lanka, nobody dares to challenge or oppose Ravan's decisions. Ravan has Sovereign Power as well as the freedom to use it. The incidents which are mentioned by Divakaruni in the novel vindicate that Ravan "uses" his power for his own benefits. In case of Sita, he could have killed her instantly in order to seek Surpankha's revenge but he does not kill her because of his own whims and desires. He becomes aggressive when Vibheeshan tries to oppose his decision of keeping Sita. He does not even think about the consequences and about his public. His selfishness brings devastation to his kingdom and his own self.

Disobedience of Sovereign Power results into what Vibheeshan, Ravan's brother, faced. From the very beginning of Sita's abduction, Vibheeshan tries to convince Ravan to return Sita but Ravan never listens to him. Vibheeshan takes Ram's side despite being aware of Ravan's interest in Sita and that is the reason "Vibheeshan had been banished. Ravan had kicked him in the chest, the greatest insult an asura could imagine, in the presence of all the courtiers, and called him a traitor" (Divakaruni 216). He has to leave Lanka as Ravan throws him out of it and Vibheeshan does not have courage to protest what Ravan does to him, in fact he cannot protest against what a king does or orders and such is the power of sovereignty "since all law refers to the authority of the king, all criminality is an affront to the king, and all but the pettiest kinds of criminality... were liable to be punished by death" (Kelly 94). Ravan, being the king of Lanka, has complete authority, Vibheeshan becomes the criminal by disobeying Ravan and the way Ravan kicks him out of Lanka is the punishment of the crime.

Foucault's sovereignty is different from sovereignty in contemporary times as Foucault's sovereignty is based completely on monarchy. *The Forest of Enchantments*, being the retelling of *Ramayana*, fits into Foucault's concept of Sovereign Power. The novel portrays every aspect of Foucault's sovereignty including supremacy of king, absoluteness of kingdom, monopoly of rule, law making, coercive domination and also the consequences of not following the rules and commands of the king of sovereign kingdom. After reading into *The Forest of Enchantments* with the lenses of Foucault's sovereignty, it becomes crystal clear that Foucault's concept of Sovereign Power talks about a rule which is blind and deaf in many ways. Ram, without questioning or challenging, has to spend fourteen years of his life in forest for no mistake. Ravan kicks out his brother Vibheeshan for telling him what is right and what is wrong. Sita who remains pure and loyal for Ram throughout her life is labeled as "unfaithful", "impure" and "immoral". She is abandoned by her husband twice, despite not being at fault. Even after the trial by fire, she is disbelieved and banished from Ayodhya. The sole purpose of Ram in banishing Sita is same as Foucault's purpose in punishing a criminal, "...a policy of terror: to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign" (*Discipline & Punish* 49).

As every coin has other side, likewise Foucault's sovereignty, among all its shortcomings, gives a positive message when one studies it in context of *The Forest of Enchantments*. The two kingdoms that the novel depicts, one of Ram's and other of Ravan's, are sovereign kingdoms having different kings. Ravan, undoubtedly is good for his own public, but he is a selfish king. He kicks his own brother Vibheeshan out of kingdom for giving him advice to return Sita back. Ravan, being selfish, thinks just about himself and throws him out brutally just for opposing Ravan. This incident vindicates him to be a brutal as well as a selfish king of sovereign state who misuses his power for fulfilling his own whims. On the contrary, Ram, as the king of sovereign kingdom of Ayodhya, is a selfless king who abandons his own wife for the welfare of his kingdom. He loves his wife, but he takes the decision of leaving her because he knows their suffering shall save the whole public from suffering. Being a selfless king, he uses his Sovereign Power for the benefit of public, keeping himself and his wife in pain. So, both the sides of a coin are visible in the novel. Sovereign Power, when used properly, can save a kingdom as Ram does by saving Ayodhya from falling apart but at the same time Sovereign Power, when misused, can bring destruction as Ravan brings to Lanka.

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