



Epistemic Violence and the Politics of Knowledge Erasure in *Fahrenheit 451*: A Study through Pérez, Medina, Foucault, and Cunningham

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ABSTRACT

In Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the systemic dismantling and destruction of knowledge reflects Moira Perez's concept of Epistemic Violence where there is a slow and calculated silencing of the population's thought and individual identity. This paper will elaborate on how tyrannical and totalitarian states manipulate knowledge/literature to maintain power and suppress individuality. The paper uses Moira Pérez's theory of epistemic violence, José Medina's concept of epistemic death, Michel Foucault's idea of subjugated knowledge, and Michael Cunningham's theory of educide has criminalized curiosity and suppresses intellectual thoughts/ diverse opinions. In Bradbury's novel, the very act of burning books/literature becomes a metaphor for the structural denial of voice and agency. Drawing instances from history such as the Nazi regime's burning of predominantly Jewish literature, Bradbury's novel is highlighting the fact that the suppression of knowledge is not only a historical reality but a deeply human loss. Characters such as Captain Beatty and the naive Clarisse show the painful and gruesome consequences of living in a tyrannical state that finds pleasure in burning books. Ultimately it is not just burning books but it is against the very act of thinking freely and voicing conflicting and diverse opinions. In a society that runs solely on conformity, people who think freely, raise questions and voice diverse opinions are seen as threats. These frameworks will



highlight how Bradbury's novel reflects and accurately mirrors real life instances.

Introduction

The philosopher Moira Perez addresses the fact that out of the various means of violence that plague marginalized communities, epistemic violence is one of the least addressed, at least the least recognised and almost this invisible form of violence. Perez refers to the concept as a form of "slow violence" and it serves as a key figure in understanding the lived experiences of marginalized communities. It is important to understand that Perez isn't referring to the act of physical violence but violence that causes a huge sense of disparity and variations in the very systems that are responsible for the production, circulation and the recognition of academic knowledge. Her paper also mentions that epistemic violence can also lead to the "the denial of epistemic agency for certain subjects". If left unchecked, it can also expand into other harmful forms of intellectual violence like social exclusion.

When one applies Perez's framework on Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, it becomes clear that the act of burning books, in this case forbidden knowledge/ literature, serves as an example of the denial of epistemic agency of the subjects in a totalitarian society. In Bradbury's dystopian novel, books are burnt, voices are silenced and literature as a whole is seen as something that should quite literally be eradicated from society. In the novel, the firemen serve the state, not to extinguish fires but to ignite houses that hoard books on fire with kerosene. An article by Blas Radi called "*the network of unequal relationships in the production of knowledge*," states that such violence can further lead to "the de-qualification and disapproval of epistemic subjectivity." My paper will predominantly draw from Perez's analogy along with references to other intellectuals and critics like Gayatri Spivak, Michel Foucault, and Miranda Fricker.

The Institutionalization of Epistemic Violence in *Fahrenheit 451*

In Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, this framework of epistemic violence has been institutionalized, particularly by the very act of book burnings and censorship of media. Perez explains in her paper that violence in our case isn't any particular action or event but rather as "*a form of social relationships characterized by the denial of the other*". It is quite a "*historical and structural erasure of one's epistemic legitimacy*". In Bradbury's dystopia, we see a society where authors are prevented from being known by the authoritarian state. The protagonist of the novel, Guy Montag is a fireman himself and during the initial chapters is seen to be abiding by their official slogan which goes as "*Monday burn*



Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then burn the ashes. That's our official slogan." This very act of reducing an author's work to mere ashes greatly equates to Perez's analysis of erasing the epistemic authority of the author. In the case of the novel, owning and reading books is punishable by law and the authoritarian state forbids its citizens from reading books to maintain conformity and status quo. The denial of knowledge, the denial of reading, denial of an author's works is quite systematic and through the act of state-sponsored book burning, it becomes apparent that the state doesn't just deny the spread of literature, it views it as dangerous and "unworthy".

French philosopher and academician Michel Foucault came up with the term of "subjugated knowledge," particularly those "coming from below". In his lectures Foucault states that "*a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.*" This phenomenon can be seen manifesting itself in the novel where the authoritarian regime not only burns canonical literary texts but quite actually suppresses not only the act of knowing but knowing itself. If we analyse the character of Clarisse McLellan, Montag's neighbor, she is someone who is quite inquisitive and questions the things around her. While having a conversation with Guy Montag, she asks him "*Do you ever read any of the books you burn?*" For her curiosity, she always stands out in a state that values conformity. She even tells Montag "*I'm seventeen and I'm crazy. My uncle says the two always go together.*" By asking Montag if he ever read the very books he burns, she wasn't just questioning his role as a fireman, but the entire epistemic foundation of the society around her. She even asks Montag "*Didn't firemen prevent fires rather stoke them up and get them going?*" Her sudden disappearance in the novel is casually mentioned and quickly dismissed. This just goes on to highlight that her traits like inquisitiveness and curiosity to know the "why" isn't tolerated in a totalitarian society that views conformity. Her habits of questioning Montag whether he read any of the books he burnt did not align with the hierarchical epistemic order. This just highlights the fact that voices like hers are not only ignored but ultimately forgotten. Her fate affirms the state's control over not just what can be known, but *who* is allowed to know—and whose ways of knowing are allowed to persist.

Medina's Epistemic Death and the erasure of voice

Philosopher Jose Medina considers the most extreme form of epistemic violence as "epistemic death", more accurately as "hermeneutical death". To briefly explain this phenomenon, the individuals under the oppressive systems aren't allowed to participate in "meaning making" and "meaning sharing" practices.



In his work *“the Epistemology of Resistance”*, he speaks about *“imposed silences prevent members of different groups from interacting epistemically in fruitful ways—from listening to each other, learning from each other, and mutually enriching each other’s perspectives”*. This very act of imposing silence is what we observe in the novel when there is a strict state imposed silence, citizens are barred from reading and literature itself is reduced to ashes itself. The very act of burning literature is a potent example of epistemic erasure and denial of epistemic agency. Through this, the states make sure that there aren’t any conflicting voices from the past or present that can enlighten the population. In fact, the opening lines of the first chapter state *“It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with the great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the taters and charcoal ruins of history.”* The point that I want to highlight in this quote is *“it was a pleasure to burn.”* In Medina’s work, he speaks about how epistemic violence has become normalized to the point of aestheticization. This very silence can go unrecognised as it is disguised as “routine” and done to maintain “order”. Through the opening lines, we see how routine the destruction has become almost to the point where it is pleasurable. Hence, the lines *“It was a pleasure to burn.”*

In *Fahrenheit 451*, the ownership of books has become illegal and citizens caught with books face not only imprisonment but their homes, along with the books within, are burned by the firemen. This is also an epistemic strategy to enforce silence amongst the citizens of the state. There is one particular incident in the novel where the firemen receive a call about an old woman who has allegedly been hoarding books. Upon discovering the books, it now becomes their job to burn them naturally. The old woman knelt among her books and said *“You can’t ever have my books.”* Captain Beatty then says, *“Where’s your common sense? None of those books agree with each other. You’ve been locked up here for years with a regular damned Tower of Babel. Snap out of it! The people in those books never lived. Come on now!”* It is through the acts of criminalizing literature and by quite actually burning them that the state prevents its people from *“interacting epistemically in fruitful ways”*. When people have no access to books, how will they listen to each other, learn from each other and mutually enrich each other’s perspectives? That fact that Captain Beatty very bluntly says *“The people in those books never lived”* just shows us the state is trying to delegitimize the author’s lived experiences and indoctrination of its citizens, this idea that knowledge from the past has any relevance or truth. These authors have quite literally been erased from history since their writings had conflicted views.



Michael Cunningham's theory of Educide

The theory of Educide by Michael Cunningham is highly critical of the fact that knowledge systems are deliberately suppressed to control the narratives. Cunningham defines educide “*as the intentional destruction or manipulation of knowledge to enforce ideological conformity, often at the expense of truth and diversity.*” It is important to consider that the events that terrified Bradbury were Nazi regime’s book burnings and propaganda campaigns that took place from 1933 to 1945. If we use the theory of Educide to analyse *Fahrenheit 451*, we see how the instances from the novel reflect this theory and draw inspiration from real life historical events. The key concepts mentioned in Cunningham's paper named “*Nazi Book Burnings and Propaganda (1933-1945)*” were the erasure of diverse perspectives and more importantly the suppression of truth to maintain ideological conformity. When we apply this to *Fahrenheit 451*, we can clearly see that the state erases (symbolically and literally) any and all literature that gives rise to diverse perspectives.

In the later parts of the first chapter titled “*The Heart and The Salamander*”, Captain Beatty says to Montag “*Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They did. Magazines became a nice blend of vanilla tapioca. Books, so the damned snobbish critics said, were dishwasher. No wonder books stopped selling, the critics said.*” The fact that Beatty considers authors as people who are “*full of evil thoughts*” demonizes authors who have diverse views to a totalitarian state. This particular instance reflects a particular concept from the theory of Educide called “Perpetuation of Bias” which is used to promote prejudiced views. In the context of the novel, Beatty’s quote reflects that only the “truths” that were approved by the state are trustworthy and legitimate and any such diverse perspectives were not and were to be ultimately erased. This also reflects one of the key arguments of Cunningham’s paper is that totalitarian regimes like the Nazis targeted knowledge to maintain power. It also reflects the concept of Suppression of individuality since Beatty’s quote is vilifying not only the authors but the act of thinking differently itself. Even looking back at history, we learn that individuality and independent thought pose a major threat and should be erased at all costs

Conclusion

The act of suppressing knowledge in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* quite accurately depicts the concept of epistemic violence. The novel draws parallels from real life historical events (such as the book burnings by the Nazi regime) to show us how knowledge systems are manipulated by totalitarian states to maintain conformity amongst its population. Again, drawing from history, the novel shows us the diverse perspectives such as literature that questions the status quo and the established norms are erased (both



symbolically and literally). In this paper, I've used multiple different yet apt frameworks such as Moira Pérez's theory of epistemic violence, José Medina's notion of epistemic death, Michel Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledges, and Michael Cunningham's theory of educide to show the readers how systemic the act of silencing marginalized voices has become, almost routine. We see this through the novel's depiction of real life historical events.

Citations

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