Role of Power and Punishment and Power and Gender: Analytical Essay

The infliction of any kind of pain or loss upon a person for a misdeed (i.e., the transgression of a law or command) is referred to as Punishment. Punishment comes in various forms such as legal, capital, social, etc. It acts as a form of social control in society, as the means to punish those who deviate from the laws or the norms of the society. It is one of the major ways to control crime in society, to make the criminal pay for the crimes that they have committed. In society, punishment is intricately linked with power and social stratification. Only those who are high up in any social stratification, have the power to give out punishments in society.

There are majorly two forms of punishment that are found, one is the old way of a very spectacular display of the punishment, while the other is the more “modern” and “gentler” way of punishment which is more humane and civilized. On Foucault’s account, this second stage eventually led to the full-blown modern system of what he calls ‘discipline’. During the old times, the punishments given out were very physical and full of horror. They were based on the idea of torture and then death. This was done to make sure that the people realized the consequences of breaking the laws and will hence not try to break them (Retribution). This was majorly based on the crime committed. However, punishment in modern times is much less severe and has a lot of factors taken into consideration like the criminal’s mental state and the cause that led him to commit the crime. They are much more subtle and mostly based on observation and reforming oneself (Rehabilitation). It is a method used to produce ‘docile’ bodies, which are those who work precisely the way that one wants them to. This can be done using three major methods which are Hierarchal Observation (based on the obvious fact that we can control what people do merely by observing them), Normalizing Judgement (individuals are judged by where their actions place them on a ranked scale compared to everyone else) and Examination (combines hierarchical observation with normative judgment).

In society, there is no single centre of power. Power is dispersed throughout society, in a multitude of micro centres. Those who punish are the ones who have a position of power over the ones committing the crime. It is through punishment that people show their dominance over the ones they consider as deviants, criminals, or the “other”. For example, in the context of domestic abuse, one partner abusing the other in the name of Punishment, is usually considered as a display of power or authority over the person. It is by abusing the victim, in the name of punishment, trying to teach them a lesson, that they show off their power. Another example of punishment as a form of power could be the “Whites” subjugating the “Black”. To prove that the whites were a much more superior and advanced race, they had to show that the Blacks were not. They did so by enslaving the other community, just to prove their superiority and power.

Power in society can also be seen, in various instances, through the differences in different gender and sexes. Gender refers to a very social concept, whereas sex refers to very biological concept. Your ‘sex’ is decided at the time of conception by your genitalia, whereas, your gender is whatever you want it to be. Gender is a spectrum while there can only ever be two sexes, male and female. Based on this, two theories have emerged: one emphasising attitudes and social expectations, centring on the idea of 'sex roles'; the other presupposing the

categories of 'women' and 'men' and focussing on power relations between them.

There has always been a direct relation between gender and power, in the sense that, the whole idea of patriarchy has been originated from the idea of ‘Pater’ which that men are the most powerful and hence are in charge. Patriarchy was enforced and followed by society based on the concept of oppression or suppression of women and confine them to their house. Some examples of this used by the more extreme feminists are that of sexual domination and reduction of women to mere objects of pleasure. They argued that through the examples of how pornography is mostly male centric and male domination and secondly by saying that an act of rape committed by a man is mostly to show his dominance over her, more than anything else

But the irony here is that, over centuries, patriarchy turned into a force that is oppressive not just towards women, but towards every individual in that society, irrespective of their gender or sexuality. If we use the argument of pornography and male domination, how will that possibly explain the gender role between homosexual porn. Even with the argument of rape, women or not the only ones who get raped and men aren’t the only ones who rape. This fact completely changes the perspective that power lies only with the man in any given relation and also changes our perspective on the power dynamics of gender in society.

In modern times, it is very difficult to determine the relation between power and gender, as it is no longer just black and white or male and female. Power and role cannot be narrowed down and given just based on one’s sexual organs. Modern society sees a lot of variation in gender and sex. New terms and new identities have come up which blur the lines between two distinctive genders. In addition to that, the change lifestyle of women and their freedom is also very different from when it was before. Women now may even hold more power, in some situations, than men do. One example of this could be working mothers and stay at home fathers. This completely shifts the power dynamics from the notion of men being the bread winner and the women looking after the households. Also, in the case of single women or single mothers, the are the ones seen as powerful and independent. This again is a deviant from what is considered as ‘normative’ in traditional patriarchal societies.

The change in power dynamics can also be seen in changing sexual relations present in society. The ideal norm of patriarchal society is mostly heteronormative in which the male figure is dominant. But with the times changing, there has also been a shift from this view of heteronormativity. In a society, where homosexuality is also present, there is no way of knowing who the dominant figure is in a same-sex couple. The rules or roles of a heterosexual couple and patriarchal heteronormativity cannot be applied in their case, as they are within themselves, a whole different community with their own set or rules, roles and norms. In a situation like this, the power dynamics also change. There is no longer a definite “male dominant” figure and any one of the partners could be dominant. Even in a polygamous relation, there maybe more then one dominating figure, who may or may not be male.

Society is constantly evolving and is never the same at two different point of times. In such a society, it very difficult to keep up with fluctuation of power from one individual to another, whether it be in the political and social sphere or within the culture and private sphere. The ways of punishment, the norms of relations, the dominant and the subjugated keep changing with the change in the power regime of the society. Every society has a different way in which they may punish an individual. In recent, modern times, the changes in these power dynamics are very hard to ignore. Mass movements are being held across the world to show that things can never

again be the way the were. The world is not just black and white but is shades of grey. The criminal can no longer just be spectacularly killed and only the male can not be the ‘pater’ anymore. The very foundation on which most societies were built is coming down. People are recognizing the identities and problems related to these issues that had once upon a time been ignored and ostracized. The world is trying to change and become a more empathetic, humane and an inclusive space for every individual alive.