

POWER, POLITICS, AND PEDAGOGY: A FOUCAULDIAN READING OF ACADEMIC SPACES IN *THE ENGLISH TEACHER* AND *LUCKY JIM*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of power, politics, and pedagogy through a Foucauldian reading of *The English Teacher* (R.K. Narayan, 2007) and *Lucky Jim* (Kingsley Amis, 2000). Both novels, though separated by geography and tone, expose the subtle and overt workings of power in academic institutions — where ideals of learning and intellectual freedom are continuously negotiated, compromised, and disciplined. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of *power/knowledge*, the study argues that education, rather than existing as an autonomous pursuit of truth, often operates as a site of surveillance, normalization, and hierarchy. By reading the disillusionment of Krishnan and Jim Dixon as responses to these mechanisms, the paper highlights how literature not only reflects but critiques the institutionalization of intellect and the politics of knowledge. The discussion ultimately extends toward the contemporary educational environment, where the same power structures persist under new disguises — bureaucratic control, ideological conformity, and performative meritocracy.

Key words: Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, the English teacher,

Knowledge, Power, and the Academic Machine

The pursuit of education has long been considered one of humanity's noblest enterprises — an act of illumination that frees the mind from ignorance. Yet, as countless literary and philosophical works remind us, institutions built to safeguard enlightenment often become the very structures that suppress it. Within the modern university, the ideals of truth, rationality,

and learning are mediated by systems of authority, discipline, and competition. Michel Foucault's theory of *power/knowledge* offers a penetrating lens to understand this paradox: knowledge does not simply resist power; it is produced through and by power. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault writes, "Power and knowledge directly imply one another; ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (27). When applied to the space of education, this insight reveals how every aspect of academia — from examinations to appointments, from pedagogy to promotion — functions as part of a disciplinary grid that regulates both thought and conduct.

R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* dramatize this Foucauldian truth through characters who inhabit and question the very institutions that define their professional and personal lives. Krishnan, the gentle and introspective protagonist of *The English Teacher*, enters teaching as a moral vocation. He perceives education as "the noblest profession" (Narayan 5), one that connects intellect with the inner growth of the human spirit. However, as he encounters the bureaucratic indifference of his college and the triviality of academic conventions, his initial reverence turns to quiet disillusionment. Similarly, in *Lucky Jim*, Jim Dixon, the insecure and sardonic history lecturer, confronts a university culture saturated with hypocrisy, careerism, and intellectual posturing. Amis's novel is comic where Narayan's is contemplative, yet both reveal how the ideals of education collapse under the weight of power relations and institutional gamesmanship.

In both narratives, the educational institution functions as what Foucault calls a *disciplinary apparatus* — a space that produces "docile bodies" through surveillance, judgment, and normalization (*Discipline and Punish* 136). Krishnan's life as a college lecturer is marked by a subtle tension between the purity of his vocation and the mechanical routines imposed upon him. The classroom, instead of being a site of intellectual awakening, becomes an arena of

monotony and alienation. He reflects, “I am a teacher of English. I have read nearly all the English poets and novelists, yet I feel that life escapes me” (Narayan 42). This sense of estrangement captures Foucault’s idea that modern institutions regulate not only what one does but what one *is allowed to feel* and *to think*. Knowledge, in this sense, is not emancipatory; it is administered.

Amis’s university, though couched in mid-twentieth-century British realism, displays the same structure of disciplinary control. The bureaucracy of Professor Welch’s department epitomizes an order that rewards obsequiousness and penalizes authenticity. Dixon’s survival depends on navigating invisible hierarchies — the unspoken codes of behavior, the performance of respectability, and the mimicry of intellectual seriousness. His famous act of mockery — the drunken parody of Welch’s pretentious lecture — is not merely comic rebellion; it is a moment of epistemic resistance, a refusal to participate in what Foucault terms “the regime of truth” that sustains institutional power (*Power/Knowledge* 131). In laughing at the academic establishment, Dixon destabilizes the façade of objective knowledge, revealing its dependence on ritual, repetition, and authority.

The parallels between Krishnan and Dixon, though emerging from distinct cultural landscapes, underscore a universal truth about educational institutions: they reproduce power even while claiming to disseminate knowledge. Both protagonists are caught in what Foucault would describe as the *microphysics of power* — the minute, everyday operations of control that render individuals complicit in their own subjection. Krishnan’s obedience to institutional formalities, his attendance at perfunctory staff meetings, and his submission to administrative norms demonstrate how the subject internalizes discipline. Likewise, Dixon’s need to flatter his superiors and perform intellectual enthusiasm mirrors the same pattern of self-regulation.

The Performance of Power and the Crisis of Authenticity

Foucault's writings remind us that power is never only oppressive; it is also productive. In *Discipline and Punish*, he observes that "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194). Educational systems, similarly, do not merely restrict knowledge but actively create the categories, hierarchies, and discourses through which learning becomes intelligible. In both *The English Teacher* and *Lucky Jim*, these "rituals of truth" manifest in the codes of academic respectability and intellectual validation that define who may speak, what may be said, and how authority is maintained.

For Dixon, the rituals of academia are absurdly theatrical. The conference scenes in *Lucky Jim*, with their pompous speeches and artificial manners, capture the performance of power within the university's symbolic order. Amis describes Dixon's horror at the "arty, phony, self-congratulatory" tone of the event (Amis 86). This description aligns closely with Foucault's recognition that institutions sustain themselves through repetition of symbolic practices that create an illusion of continuity and legitimacy. Dixon's ridicule of these performances can be read as a Foucauldian critique of discourse — an exposure of how power hides behind the mask of intellectual objectivity.

In *The English Teacher*, by contrast, the mechanisms of power are subtler, woven into the language of duty, humility, and cultural aspiration. Narayan's portrayal of the colonial education system still lingering in independent India demonstrates how authority persists even after its original structures have been dismantled. Krishnan's curriculum, dominated by British literature, reveals what Foucault might call "the archive" — the system that defines what counts as knowledge at a given historical moment (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 128). The teacher becomes both a transmitter and a prisoner of this archive. His journey

toward spiritual education is, therefore, a Foucauldian reawakening — an effort to break free from the colonial and institutional scripts that regulate his intellectual identity.

Both novels thereby stage the same paradox Foucault identifies in modern institutions — the impossibility of locating a space entirely outside power. Every gesture of rebellion, every act of nonconformity, occurs within the grid of forces it resists. Dixon’s cynical humour is tolerated by the very system it mocks, just as Krishnan’s spiritual teaching finds its legitimacy through his continued association with the college. The institution, in Foucault’s terms, absorbs resistance as part of its function: “Power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the privilege of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions” (*Power/Knowledge* 98).

Surveillance, Resistance, and the Humanizing of Knowledge

When we extend these literary insights to the broader educational landscape, the relevance becomes striking. The contemporary university, despite its technological progress and democratizing rhetoric, continues to exhibit the same structural contradictions. The vocabulary has changed — *quality assurance, academic ranking, impact metrics, employability* — but the underlying logic remains disciplinary. The classroom and the office are now supplemented by the digital platform, yet surveillance intensifies rather than diminishes. Foucault’s concept of *panopticism* offers a useful metaphor: the transparent world of data, evaluation, and visibility transforms education into a perpetual performance. Faculty and students alike are monitored through assessment systems that render them objects of scrutiny — a dynamic Dixon would instantly recognize.

Even ideals such as “academic freedom” or “student empowerment” can become instruments of control when translated into bureaucratic policy. In the Foucauldian sense, freedom itself becomes a technology — a managed and measurable condition. The laughter of Amis’s

protagonist and the spiritual solitude of Narayan's are both reminders that genuine freedom resists quantification. They seek authenticity, not performance; understanding, not recognition.

What makes these literary explorations enduringly relevant is their refusal to separate the personal from the political. Foucault insists that power operates in the most intimate zones of life — “in the movements of the body, in the gestures, in everyday life” (*Discipline and Punish* 139). Dixon's forced smiles, Krishnan's suppressed frustrations, the fatigue of grading, the anxious diplomacy of faculty meetings — these are not trivial inconveniences but expressions of a deeper truth: education as a field of disciplined conduct. Through irony and introspection, both authors illuminate how the culture of academia shapes the very texture of emotion, desire, and selfhood.

Yet the novels also point to fragile spaces of resistance — laughter, love, solitude, sincerity. Dixon's laughter, though derisive, punctures the solemnity of academic pretense; Krishnan's spiritual awakening, though personal, opens a vision of education grounded in compassion. Foucault's later work on *ethics* would interpret such gestures as moments when the subject reclaims the capacity to shape itself — not by escaping power, but by transforming its relationship to it. Resistance, he reminds us, is not external to power but coextensive with it: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority” (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* 95).

The implication for education is profound. Reform cannot consist merely in replacing old hierarchies with new ones or invoking abstract ideals of quality and excellence. Instead, it demands a rethinking of how knowledge is produced, circulated, and valued. Both novels urge a return to sincerity — a moral engagement that resists the reduction of education to utility or status. In Krishnan's final understanding of teaching as communion, and in Dixon's

refusal to perpetuate academic hypocrisy, we witness attempts to recover education's ethical core.

Reading these works through Foucault enables us to recognize that the crisis of education is not accidental but structural. It arises from the very success of institutions in organizing knowledge and authority. The university, as both Narayan and Amis depict it, functions as a microcosm of society's power relations: hierarchical, performative, and self-legitimizing. But literature's gift is its ability to reimagine — to offer counter-discourses where theory can only describe. In Krishnan's spiritual pedagogy and Dixon's irreverent laughter, we glimpse what Foucault might call "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (*Power/Knowledge* 82) — forms of understanding that challenge the official narratives of competence and success.

Ultimately, both novels affirm the necessity of imagination in confronting the politics of education. Krishnan's rediscovery of inner truth and Dixon's comic defiance become acts of moral and intellectual courage. They remind us that while institutions define the conditions of thought, they cannot extinguish the human impulse to think otherwise. Education, then, remains a contested space — simultaneously an apparatus of control and a field of possibility.

If Foucault's vision sometimes appears bleak, it also offers hope in its acknowledgment of multiplicity. Power is everywhere, but so too are the cracks through which resistance emerges. The laughter echoing through Amis's university halls and the quiet introspection of Narayan's teacher are not merely narrative resolutions; they are forms of critique — ways of being that elude capture. In recognizing the constructedness of academic authority, they invite readers to imagine education anew: not as the administration of knowledge but as the cultivation of awareness.

Conclusion

In the end, the question both writers pose — and which Foucault helps us articulate — is not whether education is corrupt or pure, but whether it can remain human. To teach, to read, to think: these are acts of engagement with power, yet they are also acts of freedom. The true task of pedagogy, the novels suggest, lies not in escaping power but in using knowledge to make power visible. Only then can education reclaim its ethical purpose — not as the pursuit of perfection, but as the courage to confront the imperfect structures through which we learn, live, and know.

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