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## **Book Banning Discourse and American Society in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451***

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### **ABSTRAK**

Penelitian ini merupakan hasil pembacaan wacana *Foucauldian* terhadap novel *Fahrenheit 451* karya Ray Bradbury yang mendeskripsikan masyarakat distopia yang hidup dalam pengawasan dengan wacana pelarangan buku. Terdapat dua wacana berlawanan dalam novel, yaitu wacana pelarangan buku dan wacana pembebasan buku. Wacana pelarangan buku dikonstruksi sebagai salah satu upaya dalam sistem pengawasan oleh penguasa. Akibatnya, masyarakat kehilangan kebebasan berpikir dan hidup dalam keseragaman. Sedangkan sebagai wacana lawan, kebebasan membaca ditekankan sebagai hal penting yang seharusnya tidak boleh dipisahkan dari kehidupan masyarakat. Analisis ini menemukan bahwa wacana pelarangan buku mempengaruhi kehidupan masyarakat yang menyebabkan pembodohan massal akibat kehilangan kebebasan berpendapat. Pada akhirnya, satu-satunya cara untuk melepaskan masyarakat dari pengawasan dan kungkungan pemerintah totaliter adalah dengan mengembalikan kebebasan membaca .

**Kata kunci: fiksi sains, pelarangan buku, wacana, pengawasan, kebebasan.**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* using a Foucauldian perspective. The novel depicts a dystopian society living under discourse surveillance in which books are banned. There are two contradicting discourses in the novel. First, book banning discourse which is constructed as system surveillance, makes people live in uniformity and lose independent thoughts. Second, freedom of reading discourse posits that reading and books play a vital role in society. The writer finds that book banning discourse influences the society and eliminates freedom of speech. Thus, in order to free the society from the authority surveillance, the freedom of reading must be restored.

**Keywords: science fiction, book banning, discourse, surveillance, freedom**

## 1. Introduction

*Fahrenheit 451* is a American Academy of Arts and Letters Award winning novel written by Ray Bradbury, which was first published in 1953. The title, *Fahrenheit 451*, refers to the temperature at which paper burns out because the novel tells about a future world where most people think that books are bad and that they are banned and burnt for being the source of all discords and unhappiness. The interesting idea that Bradbury describes in this novel is how the society lives in uniformity and accepts the rule which is set for them and one of the rules is the prohibition of reading books. A lack of books in the society eliminates independent thought and eradicates the possibilities of people to find flaws in the system.

As illustrated in *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury exposes two opposing discourses on books. On the one hand, books are claimed as harmful things which give bad influence to people that they are burnt by “firemen” whenever they find them. Set in a dystopian society, the people in the novel are dictated to avoid books because they are believed to contain nonsense. The discourse that books are bad makes people afraid of reading and keeping books. On the other hand, as the counter discourse, books are presented as great precious artifacts which will alter human lives for the better.

## 2. Background of the Research

There are always clashes of arguments in society regarding certain ideas. Book banning discourse itself is a contestable issue that produces a multitude of arguments. If book banning is presupposed as a political discourse and a form of control, there is always a powerful group behind this public discourse. Controlling people’s minds is another way to reproduce dominance and hegemony. Discourse will also invite counter discourses. In the book, Bradbury does not only remind us to the greatness of books but also alerts us that one day reading culture might be abandoned.

### 2.1. Identification of the Problem

The story of *Fahrenheit 451* implies that in reality books are still frequently banned and censored, and may be later slowly abandoned. The discourse about book bad influences is spread

in the society. The authority in the futuristic society decides that they need to encourage happiness by divorcing people from book. The authority prohibits them from reading books and the majority of people cannot resist while they are being controlled by anti-book discourse.

However the novel also presents that books are important and valuable which is shown through the struggle of the main character to challenge the status quo and to bring books and reading culture back into life. The way these discourses appear and contradict each other makes the novel becomes precious to discuss. The writer examines different voices in this novel based using Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse* as the primary basis, aiming to expose and book banning discourse and look at its influence towards society. The research focuses on the way discourse is enacted, produced and challenged in society. The issues will be divided into two basic ideas; the construction of book banning discourse and the alternative voice.

## **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

### **Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse***

Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication. As for Foucault, he looked at how power operates in society through people and their discourse. He argues that the control of discourse in society includes the procedure of exclusion, which is the most familiar is prohibition. Prohibition makes one cannot say things freely which reveals how discourse links with desire and power. Foucault suggests that each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth. Discourse it dictates what is true or not true. It provides the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish between true and false statements.

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart (Foucault 100). For Foucault, discourse is not only about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority which constitute both subjectivity and power relations. Foucault indicates a new kind of disciplinary power that could be observed in the administrative systems and social services. It is the systems of surveillance and assessment which no longer required force or violence, as people learn to discipline themselves and behave in expected ways, like prisons. This system is called as panopticon in which prison cells were arranged around a central watch so; that the supervisor could watch inmates, yet the inmates could never be certain when

they were being watched. Therefore, over time, they began to watch their own behavior (Dreyfus and Rabinow 143).

### 2.3 Methodology

In conducting this research, the writer uses library research. The primary data is taken from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as the object of the study and the secondary data is the information taken from books, notes, theses, and articles. In analyzing the data, the writer uses the qualitative analysis which focuses on meaning, perspective and understanding as well. The beginning of this research is reading and understanding the primary data. Then, finding the secondary data, and deciding the most suitable theory as the interpretation to examine the object. Finally, the primary data is analyzed by using Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse*. In presenting the result of analysis, the writer uses qualitative method which is descriptive; the collected data is in the form of words or picture than numbers. The written result of the research contains quotations from the data to illustrate and describe the arguments.

### 3. Review of Related Literature

There are two previous studies from different writers related to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* that are relevant. The first is "Myths in *Fahrenheit 451*: Promethean Rebellion in Ray Bradbury's" (Amaltea 2012) by Fernanda Luisa Feneja who states that *Fahrenheit 451* reflects the role of myth in science fiction narrative. According to this article Myth relates to the representation of humankind's archetypes and to narratives. He uses the myth of Promethean to explore the main character, Guy Montag, which he aims to show Guy Montag as an evolving Prometheus. Feneja also highlights how the value of the spoken word in narrative, where myth was born, is restored. Also, by being shared and passed on to further generations, now orally, books symbolize the democratization of knowledge.

The second is an essay entitled "Now Was Then, Then Is Now: The Paradoxical World of *Fahrenheit 451*" (Salve Regina Univ. 2010) by Micheal R. La Brie. The writer finds *Fahrenheit 451* as the reflection of today's society and the influence of pop culture. He also analyzes several characters in the novel and juxtaposes them as the model for the standard of today's groups in society. Captain Beatty "The Gravel" represents a leader of superficial phonies whose job is to put everybody else down to build themselves up and they set out to break the glass houses. Clarisse McClellan "The Rose" who is separated into small class of people that understand the true beauty and she is the epitome of free thinking.

#### **4. Book Banning Discourse and American Society in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451***

There are at least 26 books banned and challenged in the United States from May 2013 to March 2014 as reported by the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* due to their controversial contents and message. The First Amendment of the United States guarantees that everyone has the right to express views, including opinions about particular books and also ensures that none of the people has the right to control or limit another person's right to read or access information. Yet when individuals or groups fill formal written requests demanding that libraries remove specific books from the shelves, they are actually doing an attempt to restrict the rights of individuals to access books.

One of the biggest destructions of books in the United States happened during the era McCarthyism. Many books were banned because they were suspected to have been written by communist sympathizers or contain procommunist themes. Though McCarthyism had ended, book banning still happens nowadays that some people seek to restrict and remove books due to certain reasons. But it cannot be denied that the counter action against book banning still remains, such as Banned Books Week, an annual event sponsored by the national book community which regularly celebrates the freedom to read. The issue of book banning in *Fahrenheit 451* corresponds to what happen in our society.

##### **4.1. The Construction of Book Banning Discourse**

Book banning is one of the ways to enforce social conformity. In this respect, the main reason for this is to 'protect' the people in order to form the perfect society wherein people unite around the same values and to avoid discords among groups of people. It should be noted that their belief on the harmful influences of books does not naturally. Instead, it has been brought and disseminated in the interest of the authority.

The issue brought in *Fahrenheit 451* about book burning presents the same idea on why book banning discourse is constructed in the first place. Along with Captain Beatty's logic, he presents the reason for book burning is to protect the people from the content of books which may cause discords and unhappiness. "We stand against the small tide of those who want to

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make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought' "(46). Thus, the firemen work to light the fire instead of putting it out. Moreover, Captain Beatty shows how this discourse brings instant satisfaction for everybody with the illusion of equality. As he once says: "We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all is happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it" (55-56).

The practices of discourse are a form of systematized control. The discourse practices are often acquired, enacted, or organized through various institutions, such as the state, the media, education and even demands of individuals. The conduct of discourse may structure the possible field of actions of others which permits one to act upon others, whether made possible by law, status, or systems of surveillance. Inevitably, power relations cannot be reduced to a study of institution which is referred to the government. Not because they are derived from it but because power relations have come more under government control.

In the contexts of political system, basically there are two government forms namely democracy and totalitarian. The governments in *Fahrenheit 451* explicitly presents totalitarian system which restricts the people's freedom to read by using propaganda of book burning in an effort to form the perfect society. Captain Beatty as the authorized agent makes the most speeches throughout the story about condemning books for the stability of the nation: "You can't build a house without nails and woods. If you don't want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war" (58). From the excerpt, Beatty explains how burning the books prevents people from thinking so that they lose their views and opinions. He finds that people are happier when they have no choice in the matter.

The authority figures in *Fahrenheit 451* use the system of repressive surveillance and repression in their efforts to ban books. In *Fahrenheit 451*, this system is carried by the "mechanical hounds" and the established law. A mechanical hound is a tool with high technological advancement that is set to sniff books. It is described like mechanical animal made by human to help the "firemen" to figure out books and their owners, just like police dogs. The

hound is of the destructive technological tools utilized by the government to control its people. Along with mechanical hounds, the authority at the same time uses coercion and terror as the punishment by burning their house. The system uses coercion and terror in society that one's life can be threatened for keeping a book. The use of repressive surveillance with punishment frightens the people and this drives them to play safe in order prevent the horrible situations.

The society accepts beliefs, knowledge, and opinions through discourse from what they see as authoritative, trustworthy and reliable state apparatus. In the system of surveillance, in order to maintain this discourse and people's belief, it needs law to support it. Since law functions to provide for proper guidelines and order upon the behavior for all citizens as to what is accepted in society. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is an instrument that acts as a scale of truth in society since people believe that law contains what is true and false. Thus, in *Fahrenheit 451* books are forbidden and to keep a book means disobeying the law. As Montag answered to Clarisse "Do you ever read any of the books you burn?" He laughed. "That's against the law!" (6). Throughout the novel, to make book burning a permissible action, the authority form the discourse by constructing what is true and what is false. The 'truth that the government constructs is that books are bad and therefore to think otherwise is subject to penalty. As Beatty explained: "I've had to read a few in my time, to know what I was about, and the books say nothing! Nothing you can teach or believe. They're about nonexistent people, figments of imagination, if they're fiction" (79). Bradbury successfully shows how this discourse manipulates human thoughts and creates uniformity in terms of values that people hold. The dissemination and the acceptance of the discourse allows the government to take total control in virtually any aspects of what they do or read and discuss.

#### **4.2. Alternative Voice: Resistance as the Counter Discourse**

Book banning discourse as the dominant discourse, which indeed wields power, may inflict others but it nonetheless can be contested by various modes of counter discourses. We witness Montag's efforts to challenge the practices of domination. The idea is attached in Montag's action in resisting the dominant value in his society. He questions the status quo and believes that something is terribly wrong with the society. Then, as a fireman, he attempts to rebel against society by acquire knowledge and finding flaws within the system.

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Montag, for the first time in his life, questions what he sees around him and thus, brings us to the reason why he resists the dominant discourse in the society. First, the woman who is burnt in her house. This woman completely surprises Montag that she firmly refuses to come out when the firemen set the fire on her house. He believes that there must be a reason for the woman to sacrifice herself for the books. Second, his relationship with Mildred, his wife, makes him wonder whether she really loves him or not because for the entire life what she cares about is her 'family', which is the TV. He thinks the technology already takes over her life and it is all she cares about. And the last is Clarisse's death. Her death shows how the authority gets rid of anyone who carries threat to its restrictions and oppressions. Those events hugely affects Montag become the reasons why he takes action against the status quo and risks his life for finding hidden matters in books that he never knew before.

Montag as the symbol of resistance tries to break free from the restrictive system. His resistance is described through his action countering the dominant discourse. Montag shows his first action as by stealing a book. He is encouraged by his curiosity towards what is contained in book. Then, Montag tries to escape from the government when they hunt him. It seems that his plan falls through. Clearly he has no power to fight against the government. So how does Montag exercise his capability to resist? Not by trying to escape, but by turning power against itself; by mobilizing some forms of power against others. For him the best way to resist the authority and save literacy and culture is to memorize books. Montag joins the book community and memorizes book to prevent their death, "Each man had a book he wanted to remember, and did. Then, over a period of twenty years or so, we met each other, travelling, and got the loose network together and set out a plan" (146). This strategy of keeping books alive assumes particular relevance in the context of the novel, such a process holds the ultimate expression of knowledge at individual level, and in also, by memorizing books that is shared with other people through speech, the oral narrative is restored. Thus, books in *Fahrenheit 451* are symbols of the democratization of knowledge.



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## 5. Conclusion

My analysis of *Fahrenheit 451* is concluded in two main points. First, the discourse that books are pernicious. The book shows a society in which free thought is repressed through anti-book propagandas. The government of *Fahrenheit 451* presents a tyrannical authority that takes control over the society as wholly and makes them live in uniformity and conformity in order to prevent clashes and critical thinking. Thus, to maintain the constructed discourse, they use two systems of surveillance namely repressive surveillance and discourse surveillance.

Second, the alternative discourse that argues that books liberate people. The book shows, in response to the dominant discourse, the emergence of counter action to gain freedom from the strict surveillance in a subservient society controlled by totalitarian authority. In addition, *Fahrenheit 451* presents the resistance in a society corrupted by consumerist culture . As a whole, the books shows that books make the democratization of knowledge possible .

The writer also finds that both conflicting discourses are brought by two main characters, Guy Montag and Captain Beatty. Beatty presents the conformist, the voice of totalitarian society. Meanwhile, Montag as the hero presents the alternative voice to the dominant discourse. He stands for the freedom to read and rebels against the deadening conformity in the society.

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