

Resistance to the Discourse of Death in *Nothing to Be Frightened of* by Julian Barnes in the Light of Michel Foucault

Soudabe Gholami^{1,*}

¹ Student of English Language & Literature, Department of Foreign Languages, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

*Corresponding author.

Address: Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran.

^{*}Corresponding author.

Email: Soudabegholami@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This research traces the Foucauldian notion of resistance in Julian Barnes' *Nothing to Be Frightened of*. The paper is an in-depth analysis of resistance to the discourses of death and nothingness and this resistance is shown through three different levels; These levels are the discourse of literature, the title and the narrative. The narrative also shows resistance in three different forms as dismissing a God-ruled universe, bodily experiences and memories. Considering the book as either a fiction or a semi-autobiography, the analysis can manifest some interesting notions concerning the discourse of literature including the narrative and the title as a form of resistance to the discourse of death.

Key words: Discourse of death; Nothing and discourse of nothingness; Discourse of literature; Power/knowledge; Resistance; Docile bodies

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INTRODUCTION

Julian Patrick Barnes, born on 19 January 1946, is a

contemporary English writer. He has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize several times for his books *Flaubert's parrot* (1984), *England England* (1988), *Arthur and George* (2005) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). He married literary agent Pat Kavanagh. Barnes' detective novels such as *Duffy* (1980) and *Putting the Boot in* (1985) were written under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh and many of his fiction were dedicated to his wife. In *The Fiction of Julian Barnes*, Vanessa Guignery (2006) says:

The distinctive feature of Barnes's work taken as a whole is its diversity of topics and techniques, which confounds some readers and critics, but enchants others. While some underlying themes can be identified, such as obsession, love, the relationship between fact and fiction, or the irretrievability of the past, it is clear that in each novel Barnes aims to explore a new area of experience and experiments with different narrative modes. (Guignery,1)

Nothing to Be Frightened of written in 2010 deals with the theme of death, religion, art and God and is a family memoir. In this book, Barnes talks about his parents', friends' and some writers' death such as Francois Rabelais, Jules Renard, Gustave Flaubert and shows his obsession with his own death and his fear of it. In an interview, when asked about the fear of death as the main concern of the book, Julian Barnes says:

You mustn't turn death into a metaphor, a guy with a scythe. Death isn't the single stalking figure that cuts you down. Death is just a process. It's just like some terrible, heartless, bland bureaucracy at work, busily fulfilling its quota, as it always does. To personify death with too many grades of emotion is to do it too much honour. (Scarlett Baron, 2008)

• Argument

One of the most important influential thinkers is the French thinker Michel Foucault whose books made important contributions in a number of fields such as linguistics, philosophy and sociology. As M. Keith Booker (1996) says:

Foucault's understanding of society as a complex field in which various discourses compete for power has important implications

for a number of disciplines, not the least of which is literary studies, for which Foucault's work has provided important insights into the relationship between literature and society. The range of Foucault's influence can be gauged by the number of otherwise quite diverse literary scholars who have turned to his work for inspiration. (Keith Booker 119)

In his later works he investigates the power system or a system of control which was quite different from the traditional concepts of power or authorities. He shows the dynamics of power relations and puts forth the notion of power/knowledge and the possibility of resistance to power. In the following part, Foucauldian notions of discourse, power/knowledge, resistance and docile bodies will be briefly discussed.

1. DISCOURSE

One of the most frequently used terms by Foucault is discourse which is at the same time the most contradictory. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (2003) uses this word in different senses and finally he admits:

Lastly, instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements; and have I not allowed this same word 'discourse', which should have served as a boundary around the term 'statement', to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application, as the statement itself faded. (61)

According to Sara Mills (2003), the set of rules which constitute a discourse is more important than the utterances or the texts produced. Discourse is regulated by a set of rules and these rules make certain statements circulate which are seen as 'true' at the exclusion of other statements that are considered as false (Mills 54). This implies that discourse is closely associated with power relations which will be discussed more under the title Power/Knowledge.

2. POWER/KNOWLEDGE

The conventional view of knowledge is that there are always geniuses that produce knowledge which can make a great change in history. According to this view, specific individuals or intellectuals are at the center, who develop certain ideas or theories. These people can transcend the norms and conventional ideas of their period and are able to form new ideas and perspectives (Mills 67).

However, instead of approaching the history of knowledge by focusing on the ideas of great thinkers or specific intellectuals, Michel Foucault chooses to focus upon the 17th century and how its rules, conditions and transformations must have been which led to the mode of existence of our knowledge today, and how this

knowledge has centered man as the object of its study since then (Mills 67).

He believes that one is not able to produce knowledge without power and vice versa. In his interview entitled *Prison Talk*, Foucault (1980) argues that "It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" ("Prison talk" 52). For Foucault there is a new compound which is 'power/knowledge' and this new compound sounds more accurate to him while implying and emphasizing that these two are dependent on one another (Mills 69).

According to Mills, imbalances lead to production of knowledge and engendering power. In other words, whenever there are imbalances of power relations between people or institutions, knowledge will be produced. For instances the imbalance between men and women has resulted in the production of more books about women written by either men or women. In order for this imbalance to be redressed, there should be more knowledge about women (Mills 69).

In "Truth and Power", Foucault compares the Feudal system with the political system practiced in 17th and 18th centuries. He compares a society at the top of which there are a very limited number of powerful people and at the base there are many subordinate people. In this hierarchal system, the loyalty to the feudal lords is what counts as the priority (125).

In "Truth and Power", Foucault (1980) discussing the changes in political power in 17th and 18th states:

From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards, there was a veritable technological take-off in the productivity of power. Not only did the monarchies of the Classical period develop great state apparatuses (the army, the police and fiscal administration), but above all there was established at this period what one might call a new 'economy' of power, that is to say procedures which allowed the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and 'individualized' throughout the entire social body. ("Truth and Power" 125)

However, Foucault explains that in the 17th and 18th centuries there was a change in the power systems and this change was caused not only by monarchical system's developing new controlling systems such as the army and the police, but also this was due to other important factors such as the emergence of more institutions dealing with issues such as health problems, population control, delinquency, family issues etc.

Thus, power does not emanate only from the top of the political structure, but circulates to and from all social levels (Tyson 284). The changes in the power system in the 17th and 18th centuries and the emergence of more institutions to deal with issues such as health problems, education, medicalisation, family issues, delinquency etc. resulted, as Foucault puts it, in a new 'economy' of power which cannot be exercised without knowledge and these new mechanisms of power puts the knowledge into

circulation which in turn makes power circulate as well.

For Foucault power is not a negative, subversive force. On the contrary, he believes it can be quite productive. He says that when there are some imbalances of power, there is more desire for production of knowledge. Power induces pleasure and when more things are to be studied, more discourses will be produced ("Truth and Power" 119). As it was mentioned earlier, mechanisms of power cannot be exercised without knowledge and the production of knowledge leads to the circulation of power. The dynamic process of power/knowledge makes power circulate and also resistible since power is not a fixed, unchanging and subversive force that limits production of knowledge. On the contrary, power can be resisted and circulates through more production of knowledge.

3. RESISTANCE

While rejecting the negativity of power and replacing it with the productivity of it, Foucault argues that power can be resisted as well. It should be noted that productivity can be closely associated with resistance since resistance can give way to more production in different fields as it was discussed earlier.

In "Power and Strategies", Foucault (1980) puts forth the notion of resistance. He states

It seems to me that power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it, that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in. But this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law. To say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what. ("Power and Strategies" 142-143)

He replaces the negativity of power, its saying no and prohibiting with interconnectedness of power relations that cannot take the form of pure prohibition (143). He rejects that power strategies are divided into a binary structure of 'dominators' on one side and the 'dominated' on the other. Instead, he states that power relations and domination can be accompanied by 'inertia, displacement and resistance' (143). Thus, he states that resistances to power are shown at the point that power is exercised.

4. DOCILE BODIES

As it was discussed earlier, the change in the power systems of the 17th and 18th centuries led to new power relations and gave rise to new institutions. In "Body/Power", Foucault discusses that as early as the 17th century talking about the king's body was not a metaphor. The king's body had to be protected. However, in the 18th century, what became so important was the body of society or "social body which needs to be protected in a quasi-medical sense" ("Body/Power" 55).

Moreover, comparing the feudal system with the power system operated in the 17th and 18th centuries, Foucault explains about power relations exercised on the bodies of individuals. He says that "in feudal societies, power functioned essentially through sign and levies" and he continues to describe signs and levies as "signs of loyalty to the feudal lords, rituals, ceremonies and so forth, and levies in the form of taxes, pillage, hunting, war etc." ("Truth and Power" 125). He continues to say that "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a form of power comes into being that begins to exercise itself through social production and social service (125).

Considering the shift from the king's body to social body, Individuals were involved in the process of obtaining social production and productive service "and in consequence," Foucault says "a real and effective 'incorporation' of power was necessary, in the sense that power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behavior" ("Truth and Power" 125). Here Foucault discusses the use of body at the service of power. He argues that individuals' bodies were needed and power was exercised on their bodies (125).

Following the same discussion, Foucault argues that in order for the bodies to be at the service of power, there was a need of different institutions and organizations such as schools, hospitals, and prisons to control and manipulate bodies ("Truth and Power" 125). Mills, in her book *Michel Foucault* talks about operations of power upon the body and interpreting Sandra Bartky she continues to say "Disciplinary practices of, for example, exacting routines of body and object co-ordination train the body in certain ways to 'become docile' (Bartky 1988: 61)" (Mills 94).

In short, for societies it would be easier to control docile bodies and if an individual does something that is not defined under the term 'docile', there will be the need of other institutions such as prisons, mental hospitals, schools etc. to make them docile.

5. THE DISCOURSE OF DEATH

In his book, *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, Julian Barnes either as the writer, or the speaker or the fictional character, or the semi autobiographer is obsessed with the notion of death. Having death in mind, he writes about different forms of dying, his probable way of dying, his parents' death, different institutions or practices involved in the process of dying such as churches, hospitals, crematoriums, mortuaries, funerals etc.

Since each discourse involves different institutions and rules set by them it should be noted that death as a discourse is not treated to be something celestial, immaterial or not of this world. It can be referred to through different institutions and practices and its interconnectedness with other discourses. Death can

be talked and written about. It can be seen and put into practice. And as long as death is considered something quite material, it can be resisted through the discourse of literature, memories and bodily experiences.

In the following part the notion of resistance in the book *Nothing to Be Frightened of* will be discussed.

6. RESISTANCE TO THE DISCOURSE OF DEATH

The resistance to the discourse of death is shown on at least three different levels; 1. On the level of the production of the book or discourse of literature 2. The title 3. The narrative.

6.1 Resistance Through the Discourse of Literature

The discourse of literature can be shown as a resistance to the discourse of death. The choosing of the title and the material for the book, the style, and the first person narrative, the narrative, the subject can all be considered as the discourse of literature.

Both the notions of the title and the narrative can be analyzed under the discourse of literature and also separately. A book needs a title and in this case the title seems to be chosen so carefully to serve the discourse of literature in a sense that a work of art is named to be distinguished and recognized. Moreover, a title plays an important role in attracting the audience. In a give-and-take process between the audience and the writer, a writer should follow some rules for their book to be well received and sold.

The more a writer is involved in this dynamic process of give-and take and literature discourse, the more it is possible for them to resist and the more they are able to challenge different discourses and express their own ideas. Barnes collects his material from a lived life or lives and turns them into material for his book to challenge religion, a God-ruled universe and death which are closely related.

6.2 Resistance Through the Title of the Book

The title needs further analysis as the whole text does. Why is the book entitled with the word 'nothing'? Why does the book talk about 'nothing'? Why does Julian Barnes feel the urge to write about 'nothing'? The title "nothing to Be Frightened of" sounds challenging even before reading the book. One might wonder how it would be possible for them not to be scared of anything. The very first notion comes to mind once one reads the title of the book is that there is not anything that can scare one as if one does not need to be scared of anything.

However, the challenging title of the book sounds even more challenging once the whole book has been read. Julian Barnes suggests that it is this very 'nothingness' to be frightened of. Once the seemingly apparent implication of the title is reversed, the book suggests that as if nothing

is actually a real thing to be frightened of. In this case, the title of the book plays a double role or is based on double meaning; part of which can be inferred through the discourse of literature (or production of the book) and the other part is revealed through the narrative. Accordingly, the resistance implied here is based on a double role as well; one occurs before reading the book by challenging the mind of the audience through the notion of 'nothing' and 'fear' and the other can be delayed to the point and thus inferred once the book has been read.

6.3 Resistance on the Level of the Narrative

The last level to be discussed is the narrative and how the narrative itself can be considered as a resistance. The narrative shows resistance by talking about different subjects such as dismissing a God-ruled universe, bodily experiences and memories. All the three notions can be overlapping in some aspects and will be discussed accordingly.

6.3.1 Dismissing a God-Ruled Universe

The very first line of the book "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him" is the second reference to nothingness right after the title. He keeps his position firm until the end of the book. In different instances he claims to be an agnostic and not an atheist. Being an agnostic can bear a great resemblance to the very first line of the book in that they both create a dilemma.

By saying this line, the book creates an empty space in the mind of a reader once they realize something or somebody is missing. However, Barnes does not mourn the emptiness, but rather he thinks and writes about it. He contemplates that now there is no God or gods, now that God is removed and there is no God-centered universe, how death can be highlighted and that how it should be mourned and feared. He may also have this in mind that the existence of God could be better after all and could be more soothing, but now he does not believe in Him, Barnes creates his own work of art as a resistance to death in a non-God-ruled universe.

Barnes imagines the universe without a supreme power such as god(s) or God and tries to produce his own literature in a God-removed universe. His literature, thus, will be the result and product of such a universe. What he misses, he tries to create with his own words and ironically his own words are about his own self. He creates and re-creates his own self through this book and tries to remind himself of his own existence; He talks about his experiences, memories, his friends, parents and other people who bear some resemblance to him.

He can assert his power of existence by resisting against nothingness. In which case, this process seems a 'negative' one in which he claims his own identity or existence by fighting against the 'nothingness'. He writes a book about 'nothing', he writes about himself with the background of 'nothingness' and his words echo this by writing about what he has been thinking and doing over

years.

It should be noted that this nothingness is not 'void' and 'emptiness' without existence. On the contrary, it is quite material since it is a discourse that can be studied, put into words and can set some rules or limits. By creating many dilemmas in his book such as belief in God or disbelief in God, fearing death or not fearing it, belief in the other world or disbelief in it, Barnes highlights or even creates a nothingness to be filled with a family memoir, other discourses such as art, literature and his own experiences and those of his friends and other writers. Thus, Barnes would have never been able to create his book, if this nothingness were void or immaterial or could not be put into language or words. In other words, Barnes can produce his literature because nothingness and literature are of the same kind or 'material' as it was discussed about the discourse of death. He uses nothingness associates such as death, forgetfulness, old age etc. as the material to produce his work.

6.3.2 Bodily Experiences

As it was discussed earlier, the notion of docile bodies by Foucault suggests that individuals' bodies are shaped and controlled through different institutions and that it would be easier for societies to control docile bodies and power can be exercised more easily upon them. However, the discourse of death claims the body and disturbs the bodily routines. The form of resistance happening may not be to the routines bodies are accustomed to, but as a resistance to disorder of these routines. It seems that in each period of life, different responses would arise and as individuals move from childhood to adulthood and finally to old age, their bodies react to different physical disorders caused as the result of aging.

In *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, the resistances to the discourse of death and the deterioration of the body are shown through references to many bodily experiences. Julian Barnes refers to many bodily experiences; those of his or his friends, parents, grandparents, or other people. Talking about his grandparents, Barnes describes some aspects of old age such as his grandfather's use of hearing aid, or his grandmother's rumbling sound of the stomach.

He talks about his first seeing a dead body and while boys and staff were encouraged to see this body of a young teaching priest, he says "I did no more than gaze through the glass of the double door, telling myself that this was tact; whereas in all probabilities it was only fear" (19). On his mother's death, Barnes is asked if he wants to see her dead body. He replies yes. There might have been different reasons for this reply, but later while recounting this memory he says: "Wanting to see her dead body came more, I admit, from writerly curiosity than filial feeling; but there was a bidding farewell to be done, for all my long exasperation with her" (11). Her dead body seems to be shaped into writerly material for the book as a resistance to death. With all the deaths around, Barnes

tries to pick up what he thinks should be written so that he can stay 'in character'.

Rejecting God on one side and missing him on the other would make him able to fill the missing part with his own writing. Moreover, living a life without God or gods has made him indulge in more bodily experiences that can remind him of his own existence. The more he feels the pressure of death through his body, the more he tries to enjoy his body and the more he writes about the experiences.

In this respect, Barnes talking about masturbation can be considered as a form of resistance. He gives an account of this as such:

As an adolescent, hunched over some book or magazine in the family bathroom, I used to tell myself that God couldn't possibly exist because the notion that He might be watching me while I masturbated was absurd; even more absurd was the notion that all my dead ancestors might be lined up and watching too. I had other, more rational arguments, but what did for Him was this powerfully persuasive feeling – a self-interested one, too, of course. The thought of Grandma and Grandpa observing what I was up to would have seriously put me off my stroke. (14)

This resistance is not only to once strong religious doctrines, but also to this nothingness he and his literature emerge from. When he masturbates he questions God and that if He really existed, He would prevent him from doing it. The more obvious interpretation would be that he is rejecting the notion of a God-centered universe. However, a deeper reading of this can also reveal the fact that he is resisting to his being forgotten and dissolving in death. He masturbates and questions it while doing it and then he uses it as a material for his own writing, he writes about the masturbations and then again he questions them while writing. Thus, his masturbation and indulging in bodily experiences remind him of his body that would be taken away from him after his death.

6.3.3 Memories

If memories function as a means that remind oneself and others of one's existence, are they material or immaterial? Are they some things that according to Julian Barnes "I distrust the way we colour them in"? Or some things that according to his brother "I distrust the essential truth of memories" (29)? Are they in an object or an object per se, or some things immaterial in the mind of individuals by which they can live?

Answering these questions may not only be possible, but also it is not the aim of this analysis. However, the function of memory, either material or immaterial, in the form of an object, or in the mind of a person, can be shown to be a resistance to the discourse of death. Death which can be associated with nothingness and forgetfulness is challenged by Julian Barnes through the function of memories.

One of Barnes's main obsessions is his staying 'in character'. If he gets too old and cannot remember, will he stay in character? Will he still remain a writer? Will he

remain Julian Barnes as he or others know him? It seems that death for him is mostly associated with letting go of the use of language. He can manipulate language, put his own experiences into language and create a work of art. He compares his own use of language with his mother's before she dies and how her strokes prevent her from using the proper words or completing her sentences. And finally he contemplates the situation in which he would die in the middle of a sentence, or a word.

Another notion about memory can be put forth by considering the work as an autobiography talking about memories. Although Barnes denies what he writes as 'autobiography', he continues to say that "genetically, they [his parents] survive in two sons, two granddaughters and two great-granddaughters; an almost indecent demographic orderliness. Narratively, they survive in the memory, which some trust more than others" (35). In this case he highlights the role of memory.

He talks about his night terrors, his obsession, his worries, about his circle of friends gathering together every year. He clings to life by talking about death. When he talks about his circle of friends, he does not fail to notice that the number of them has decreased over years because of their death. However, he, either consciously or unconsciously, implies that the very fact he can talk about this decreasing number is due to the fact of him being alive. In other words, he has witnessed them dying over years and this implies he has been alive to see them die. His friends' death reminds him not only of his own death, but also, more importantly, of his life and being alive.

The final argument about memory is that memory functions beyond its defined boundary in Barnes's book. The book can be considered a semi-autobiography, or a diary, or a book listing dead people or a semi-fictional one. In either case, Barnes collects most of his book material from past experiences, real people and shapes them all through his imagination. He remembers the past and writes about it. He remembers and as long as he is able to remember, he can feel like, to put it metaphorically, hitting hard against the walls of nothingness and forgetfulness which are surrounding him.

He and his brother discuss the choices of their dead mother. While his brother finds indulging in maternal hypothetical irrational (to do what their mother would have wanted if she were alive), Julian insists on the fact that they should try to do what she would have wanted. And he continues to give reasons as such "a) because we have to do *something*, and that something (unless we simply left her body to rot in the back garden) involves choices; and b) because we hope that when we die,

others will do what we in our turn would have wanted" (6). Barnes wants to persist in his wants, no matter how hypothetical it might sound after his death. In other words, his resistance to death or persistence in living is furthered and stretched to the point even after his death.

He imagines a past and some speculations about the past such as the wants of the dead, and sometimes he remembers the actual past. Thinking of either imaginary past or the actual one, Barnes thinks of the past at the present time, and then contemplates how he will possibly die, and by this, he imagines his future. Thus, the way he remembers and imagines makes his memories function beyond the past and prevail in the present and move to the future.

Finally, he compares the way he feels towards his memories with the way his brother does and he says:

As a philosopher, he believes that memories are false, 'so much so that, on the Cartesian principle of the rotten apple, none is to be trusted unless it has some external support'. I am more trusting, or self-deluding, so shall continue as if all my memories are true. (5)

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