HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

THE DISCIPLINE OF DEVOTION: A FOUCAULDIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE "GOOD WOMAN" IN ABDULLA QODIRIY'S O'TKAN KUNLAR

Khikmatova Malika Bakhtiyorovna

E-mail: khikmatovamalika07@gmail.com

Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22269927

Abstract: This article applies Michel Foucault's theory of discourse formation and power/knowledge to Abdulla Qodiriy's O'tkan Kunlar (1925–26), widely regarded as the first Uzbek novel. While O'tkan Kunlar has been extensively studied within nationalist, historical-realist, and comparative literary frameworks, it has rarely — if ever — been read through a Foucauldian lens. Focusing on the novel's central female figures, Kumush and Zaynab, and the institution of polygamy that structures their fates, this article argues that the text does not simply depict a "good woman" but actively produces one, through mechanisms of discursive repetition, disciplinary surveillance, and subjectivation. The article further argues that Zaynab, typically read as villain or foil, is better understood as a product of the same discursive regime that idealizes Kumush — the two women are not moral opposites but structural twins, disciplined by the same apparatus of power. The analysis concludes by considering the novel's afterlife as a foundational discourse-producing text within the Uzbek literary canon.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, discourse analysis, power/knowledge, disciplinary power, subjectivation, Uzbek literature, Abdulla Qodiriy, O'tkan Kunlar, gender, polygamy

1. Introduction. Abdulla Qodiriy's O'tkan Kunlar (variously translated as Bygone Days or Days Gone By) occupies a unique position in Uzbek literary history: it is conventionally credited as the first Uzbek novel, serialized between 1922 and 1925 and published as a single volume in 1926. Set in nineteenth-century Turkestan against a backdrop of dynastic struggle, the novel follows the love story of Otabek, a young reformist merchant's son, and Kumush, the woman he marries out of genuine affection rather than parental arrangement. Their union is destabilized when Otabek's father pressures him into a second marriage, to Zaynab, in keeping with prevailing custom. The result is a "deadly feud" between the two wives, culminating in Kumush's death by poisoning at the hands of a rival.

Because the novel is so frequently read as a foundational text of national identity — a work that stages the tension between "progressive" and "backward" social forms on the road to modernity — Uzbek literary criticism has tended to approach it through the lens of national awakening, historical realism, and the critique of "outdated" customs such as polygamy. These readings are valuable, but they tend to treat the novel's gender politics as a reflection of social reality rather than as an active site of production — a place where the categories of "good woman" and "bad woman," "virtue" and "deviance," are not simply described but manufactured, repeated, and enforced.

This is precisely the gap that a Foucauldian approach can fill. For Michel Foucault, discourse is never a neutral window onto reality; it is a practice that constructs the objects it appears merely to describe. Applying this insight to O'tkan Kunlar allows us to ask not "does this novel accurately portray nineteenth-century Uzbek womanhood?" but rather "what work does this novel's discourse do — what kind of female subject does it produce, discipline, and authorize us to recognize as good?"

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

To date, no substantial body of scholarship appears to apply Foucauldian discourse theory specifically to this novel. This article represents, to the best of available knowledge, an initial attempt to do so — offering both a theoretical contribution (a new interpretive lens for a canonical text) and, we hope, a starting point for further debate.

2. Theoretical Framework: Foucault on Discourse, Power, and the Subject

Foucault's account of discourse departs sharply from the idea that language simply names pre-existing things. In The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969), he defines discourse as a body of statements that follow certain rules of formation — rules that determine what can be said, by whom, and with what authority, within a given historical period. A "discursive formation," in this sense, is not a single text but a whole field of statements, institutions, and practices that together produce an object of knowledge — in this case, "the good woman" — as something that appears self-evidently true.

Central to this account is Foucault's concept of power/knowledge (pouvoir/savoir): power and knowledge are not opposed but mutually constitutive. Those positioned to define what counts as virtuous, moral, or "true" about women simultaneously exercise power over them; and the exercise of that power generates further knowledge — medical, legal, literary, familial — that reinforces the original claim to truth. Discourse, in other words, is never innocent of power; it is one of power's primary instruments.

In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault extends this into an account of disciplinary power, which operates not through the sovereign's spectacular violence but through diffuse, continuous mechanisms of observation, normalization, and correction — surveillance, comparison, hierarchy, the imposition of norms against which individuals are constantly measured. Disciplinary power produces what Foucault calls "docile bodies": subjects who do not need to be coerced because they have internalized the norm and monitor themselves against it.

This internalization is the process Foucault calls subjectivation (or subjectification): the individual is not simply repressed by power but constituted as a subject through it. One does not become a "good woman" by resisting power but by taking up, inhabiting, and enacting the position that discourse has already prepared. Crucially, Foucault insists that power is never monolithic or applied only "from above": it is relational, and it produces resistance as surely as it produces conformity. Wherever discourse constructs a norm, it also opens the possibility of deviance — a category that is not outside the discourse but generated by it.

These four concepts — discursive formation, power/knowledge, disciplinary power, and subjectivation — provide the analytic vocabulary for the reading that follows.

3. Polygamy as a Disciplinary Institution

The most immediately visible operation of power in O'tkan Kunlar is institutional: the practice of polygamy, which is not a background detail but the engine of the novel's central tragedy. Otabek's second marriage to Zaynab, undertaken under pressure from his father rather than from his own desire, is presented by the narrative as a violation of Otabek and Kumush's freely chosen bond — but it is authorized entirely by custom, family hierarchy, and patriarchal prerogative.

What is significant, from a Foucauldian standpoint, is not simply that polygamy subordinates women to men's marital choices, but that it structurally pits women against each other rather than

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

against the institution that constrains them both. Disciplinary power, for Foucault, rarely operates through a single, visible act of domination; it works by distributing individuals into a field of comparison, in which each is made legible — and judgable — in relation to the others. Kumush and Zaynab do not simply coexist; they are placed in permanent, structural rivalry by the very institution that claims to accommodate them both. The "feud" between them is not a natural consequence of female jealousy (as a moralizing reading might suggest) but the predictable output of a system engineered to produce exactly this kind of comparative, competitive surveillance between women, over a resource — a husband's affection and status — that only one can fully hold.

In this light, polygamy functions less like an isolated social custom and more like what Foucault would call a technology of power: an institutional arrangement that organizes bodies, relations, and affects in the service of a norm, while displacing the resulting conflict onto the individuals it structures, so that the institution itself escapes scrutiny.

4. Kumush and the Production of the "Docile" Ideal

Kumush is constructed by the novel's discourse as the positive pole of womanhood: patient, devoted, sincere, and possessed of a love so pure it survives betrayal and culminates in martyrdom. This is a portrait offered "with extraordinary love and sincerity," in which suffering itself becomes the proof of virtue.

Read through Foucault, this is a textbook instance of the docile body: Kumush's goodness is not simply what she is, but what she is continually made to demonstrate, through endurance, restraint, and the absorption of pain without protest or transgression. Her death by poisoning is the discourse's ultimate confirmation of her virtue — she becomes fully "good" only at the point of total victimhood, unable to act, resist, or exceed the role assigned to her. The norm she embodies requires not merely obedience but self-erasure; her goodness is legible precisely because it costs her everything, including her life.

This is subjectivation at its most complete: Kumush does not appear to be coerced into her role by any single villain. She is the role. The discourse does not need to force her, because it has already produced her as a subject who wants nothing other than what the norm prescribes — devotion, patience, quiet suffering. Her interiority, as the novel presents it, has no space that exceeds or exists outside the "good woman" position; this absence of remainder is itself the discursive achievement.

5. Zaynab and the Manufacture of Deviance

If Kumush occupies the discourse's positive pole, Zaynab occupies its negative one — she is coded as jealous, destructive, and complicit (through her circle) in Kumush's death. Conventional readings tend to treat this as a straightforward moral judgment: Zaynab is simply the "bad" wife.

A Foucauldian reading resists this move. For Foucault, deviance is never the discourse's outside; it is one of its products. A norm requires a deviant pole to remain legible as a norm at all — "good" only means something in relation to a "bad" against which it can be measured, judged, and enforced. Zaynab is not external to the discursive formation that produces Kumush's virtue; she is structurally necessary to it. The same institution — polygamy, imposed by patriarchal authority, with no regard for the women's own preferences — positions Zaynab, like Kumush, as a woman whose worth is entirely determined by her position relative to a husband she did not choose to share. That she responds with resentment and hostility, rather than Kumush's saintly endurance, does not place her outside

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

disciplinary power; it simply marks her as the discourse's failure case — the docile body that did not fully submit, and who is punished narratively for that failure by being cast as villain rather than victim.

This is not to erase Zaynab's culpability within the story's own moral universe, nor to flatten the narrative's clear sympathies. It is to observe that the discourse of the "good woman" requires both figures to function: the norm and its shadow are produced together, by the same apparatus, and neither can be fully understood in isolation from the other.

6. Otabek and the Authorized Voice of Reform

Discourse, for Foucault, is also a matter of who is authorized to speak. Otabek is constructed as the novel's "ideological and compositional center" — the reformist figure who openly opposes outdated customs and pursues a new approach to family and marital life. It is significant that the novel's critique of polygamy is routed primarily through Otabek's perspective and suffering, rather than through Kumush's or Zaynab's own voice or agency.

This matters discursively: even a text that stages a critique of patriarchal custom does so by authorizing a male reformist subject to diagnose the problem, while the female characters remain objects of that diagnosis rather than subjects who articulate their own account of it. Power, in Foucault's sense, does not only discipline; it also distributes the right to speak truthfully about a situation. The novel's progressive credentials — its critique of "backward" custom — coexist with, rather than dissolve, a discursive structure in which women are the terrain on which men's reformist or traditionalist positions are worked out.

7. Discussion: The Novel as a Discourse-Producing Institution

Taken together, these readings suggest that O'tkan Kunlar does not merely represent a pre-existing set of gender norms; it participates in producing and circulating them. As the founding text of Uzbek novelistic prose, its construction of the "good woman" — patient, self-sacrificing, ultimately martyred — and its construction of the "deviant woman" — jealous, destructive, punished — did not simply describe nineteenth-century social reality but helped establish a durable literary template through which subsequent generations of Uzbek writers, readers, and critics would recognize female virtue and female failure. This is precisely the kind of effect Foucault has in mind when he insists that discourse has material, institutional consequences: it does not float above social practice but organizes it.

It is worth noting, in the interest of academic honesty, that this application of Foucauldian theory to O'tkan Kunlar could not be verified against an existing body of scholarship during the research for this article — searches did not surface prior work applying this specific framework to this specific text. This absence should be treated cautiously: it may reflect a genuine gap, or it may simply reflect the limits of the sources consulted. Either way, this article should be read as an initial proposal rather than a definitive intervention, and further engagement with Uzbek-, Russian-, and English-language literary scholarship — including specialist dissertation repositories — would strengthen or complicate the claims made here.

8. Conclusion

Reading O'tkan Kunlar through Foucault's theory of discourse formation reframes a text usually approached through nationalist or historical-realist criticism as an active site of gendered power

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

production. Polygamy operates not as background custom but as a disciplinary institution that structurally pits women against each other; Kumush's virtue is produced through the disciplined, self-erasing endurance of a docile body; Zaynab's deviance is not the discourse's outside but its necessary structural complement; and the novel's reformist critique is itself voiced primarily through an authorized male subject. None of this diminishes the novel's literary or historical significance — if anything, it clarifies why O'tkan Kunlar has remained so durably influential: as a founding discursive formation, it did not simply reflect ideas about Uzbek womanhood already in circulation, but helped constitute the very terms through which "good" and "deviant" womanhood would be recognized in the literary tradition that followed.

References

1. Foucault, M. (1972). The Archaeology of Knowledge. (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
2. Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
3. Foucault, M. (1978). The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction. (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
4. Foucault, M. (1981). The Order of Discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader (pp. 48–78). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
5. Qodiriy, A. (2018). Bygone Days (M. Reese, Trans.). (Original work serialized 1922–1925; published as a novel 1926).