oversimplified context, “binary opposites”[8]. Consequently, when the dominant discourse represents one desirable and the other undesirable, the knowledge that was produced was similar and power was maintained. The meaning of the knowledge produced effects social practices and one of the many examples for this is the aspect of Orientalism. The term mainly refers to those of the Middle East in particular. It is the unflattering characterization of such people and the sets the European culture as superior in comparison. Edward Said’s book Orientalism states, “Orientalism is better grasped at as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought...”[9]. This misconception affected both, those called the Orientals as well as the Occidentals. The former faced forms of oppression and the latter, due to their intellectual superiority (which was gained through their pioneering in discovery) was allowed to shape the world view.

This brings us to the concept of truth and whether discourse pays any heed to this notion as many of the discourses formed during the years of European discovery were based on travellers’ tales, mythology and biblical references. Thus, a mixture of fact and fantasy counted as evidence and therefore, knowledge. Quite often, even with the introduction of more accurate forms of discovery, the truth has been adjusted to fit the dominant discourse. An instance of this can be the newspaper reports recounting Commodore John Byron’s encounter with the Pantagonians[10] which were extremely exaggerated, painting the latter as “ferocious” when they were really described by Byron as “friendly”. Said has also said that one of the main functions of Orientalism was to “designate that collection of dream, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line...”. Discourse thus aided in presenting the New World as utopic with its emphasis on nature, myth and sexual fantasy (the desire and fascination of Europeans at the time) but also greatly demonized the latter (cannibalism and the absence of state and therefore, “civilization”)[11] in order to prove them inferior to the point of where their humanity was in question. The fact that there was a question as to whether non-Europeans were “true men” demonstrates how discourse can be used in relation to power in order to colonize and execute a system of slavery (racism can therefore be illustrated as the result of discourse and how it has real social affects). The Discourse of The Other eventually employed stereotyping[12] which not only simplifies different characteristics and tends to take one common view and make it universal.

Foucault argues that sometimes the truth is not what is truly the truth but becomes so due to the fact that it is a common perception of people which has ultimately been instigated by power (it is this process that Foucault refers to as the regime of truth[13]). In this sense, discourse controls what is to be considered true and false as well lending significant power to those whom the discourse benefits. There can clearly be many ethical issues in discourse as well as it always requires one party to be in power and therefore there is unfairness to the other. It is also in this aspect of truth and falsity that the distinction between discourse and ideology is brought in; the latter has emphasized on a distinction between true and false statements whereas the former is the language through which these statements are translated and possibly adjusted[14].

In conclusion, discourse is a complex phenomenon which produces knowledge to promote the powerful and it has been used profusely in the history of mankind especially aiding in the formation of racism and colonialism as well as the idea of civilization.

(1391 Words)

Citations
