

HIDDEN SILENCE AND DIALOGUE: BAKHTINIAN DIALOGICS

IN MILAN KUNDERA'S IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research is to display Milan Kundera's literary techniques in showing the capacity of silence in transforming its conventional form, so that it would be hidden under different masks, and not to be recognized as silence, regarding Mikail Bakhtin's dialogics. The main focus of this paper is to display the different forms of silence in Kundera's novel Identity. Since silence is not limited to the moments of muteness, it would be discussed that according to Bakhtin's Dialogics, hysterical repeating, overpowering, talkativeness, and writing anonymous letters, may be included as transformed forms of silence. Also it would be discussed that dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word, may be occurred during someone's interior monologues. On a larger scale, it reveals that because of different mechanisms at work, and because of the complexities which can be entered into the novel, not only dialogue and silence, but also the reality trespasses the presupposed mental frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Silence, Dialogue, Dialogism, Monologism, Utterance

INTRODUCTION

Milan Kundera, the renowned contemporary Czech writer, is famous for his philosophic, or meditative, novels. His writing techniques, artistic use of language, and innovations have been influenced by such writers as Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, and Herman Broch. The present essay intends to study one of Kundera's novels, Identity, from a Bakhtinian point of view, and tends to reveal the more complex aspects of Kundera's selected novel.

Bakhtin has been discussed to be associated with The Russian Formalism Movement. Russian Formalism is "a type of literary theory and analysis which originated in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the second decade of the twentieth century. It had focus on the formal patterns and technical devices of literature" (Abrams, 1997, 102). Among the precursors "Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Propp, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Iurii Tynianov" (Marchenkova, 2005, 57) worked within the framework of the French "abstract objectivism" tradition, deriving from the Cartesian tradition and elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure (Makhlin, 1993, 56). Formalists thought of language as "a stock of linguistic resources, i.e. expressions with associated semantic representations (abstract or decontextualized meanings) which are integrated within systems" (Linell, 1998, 3-4).

However, according to Surdulescu, "Bakhtin did not belong to either of the formalist circles in Soviet Russia or in Prague, but was claimed by some of their members, including Jakobson, to be in their ranks. In actual fact, what his studies do share with formalism is the attempt to define the specific devices which articulate a literary genre as different from others" (2000, 14).

In “Bakhtin's philosophy of language, the concept of dialogue plays the most fundamental part” (Hall, et. al, 2005, 175). A major methodological discovery of Bakhtin that describes the differences between participants in a dialogue is his concept of outsideness (Bakhtin, 1986, 7). This concept “encapsulates the idea that in order to engage in a meaningful communication one must remain distinct from, and in a manner of speaking "outside" of, one's "other"—that is, a dialogue is possible, according to Bakhtin, only when we remain different from our "others.”” (Hall, et. al, 2005, 180).

To Bakhtin a literary work is “a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon” (Moran & Ballif, 2001, 307). Therefore, in his *Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin provided translinguistic methodology to define the dialogue, its nature and meaning. In linguistics, “one begins with words and grammatical rules, and one ends with sentences. In translinguistics, one starts with sentences and the context of enunciation and one obtains utterance” (Todorov, 1984, 54). According to Bakhtin & Medvedev, “in translinguistics the relations between A and B are in a state of permanent formulation and transformation; they continue to alter in the very process of communication. Nor is there a ready-made message X. It takes form in the process of communication between A and B” (1978, 203-4).

As Todorov points out, “three factors are indicated that permit the differentiation of an utterance from a sentence: in distinction to the latter, the utterance has a relation to a speaker, and to an object, and it enters into a dialogue with previously produced utterances” (1984, 51). Every utterance, it will be recalled, “is oriented toward a social horizon, composed of semantic and evaluative elements” (ibid, 56). Bakhtin says that “the speaker’s orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another” (1981, 282).

In translinguistics “the object is meant to be the utterance” (Todorov, 1984, 49). Linguistic matter “constitutes only a part of the utterance; there exists another part, which is nonverbal, which corresponds to the context of enunciation, which is an integral part of it” (ibid, 41), which is called “the extraverbal situation of the utterance” (Clark and Holquist, 1986, 203).

There are several factors which, if not considered well, may obstruct the way of making dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word; and as a result, the speakers may fall into a gap containing silence. Michael Holquist indicates that “normally "dialogue" suggests two people in conversation, “but what gives dialogue its central place in dialogism is precisely the kind of relation conversations manifest, the conditions that must be met if any exchange between different speakers is to occur” (1990, 40). All the concepts (otherness, outsideness, equality and difference) associated with Bakhtin's theory of dialogue serve the conditions for the “relation”. Emerson remarks that “outsideness, boundaries, noncoincidence, and a love for difference are the first prerequisites for creatively understanding another person or another culture, and for being creatively understood by them” (1996, 110). Thus, “the quality and productivity of dialogue depend upon many aspects of the other and of the relationship between the utterance and the other” (White, 2009, 5).

Before starting the discussion, a glance at the summary of the novel might prove useful. One day when Chantal is out to walk on the beach in Normandy Island, she wonders that men don't turn to look at her anymore. She gets back

to the hotel and tries to talk about this to her lover, Jean-Marc. The more she tries to “manage to say it lightly, like a witticism, a parody, the phrase echoed even more dolefully than before” (Kundera, 1998, 10).

When back in Paris, Jean-Marc thinks that if he starts writing secret love letters to Chantal, she would not feel disturbed anymore, because he assumes she would feel she is still worthy of being admired and loved. He starts writing those letters with an anonymous signature. For a while, everything is as he has imagined, but soon Chantal finds out Jean-Marc to have been writing those love letters, and charges him of taking use of her feelings. So she leaves the apartment which actually belongs to her, and sets off to London. Jean-Marc also gets out of the apartment and leaves the keys behind, so that he would not be able to get back to Chantal's apartment. But he cannot back Chantal off, and tries to follow Chantal to the Munch Tunnel to London.

Wondering to chase Chantal in London or to get back to Paris, he chases Chantal in London, and finds her to be in an apartment. In the apartment Chantal finds herself alone with a hammering sound and a 70-year-old man who calls her with a different name, Anne. Chantal soon begins to understand that she does not remember anything even her own name, and that the man is “stripping her of her self” (ibid, 50).

Suddenly, Jean-Marc tries to wake up Chantal, who is shivering by fear, and repeats that “wake up, it's not real” (ibid, 51). Here Kundera interrupts the narrative the novel to ask the reader “who was dreaming? Who dreamed this story? Who imagined it? She? He? Both of them?” (ibid, 51). He also continues asking some existential questions about life.

It was a short summary of the plot, but the plot never says anything special about the characters, their behaviours, and why they behave so. To get closer to the characters, first, analyzing the situations, in which silence happens, seems necessary, as Kundera's “insistence on understanding the essence of situations” (Kundera, 1986, 34) is always prior to him. Also it is the same for Bakhtin in his Translinguistic approach to literature, as “he knows situation as a constitutive element of the utterance” (Moran and Michelle Ballif, 2000, 14), he believes that “the situation enters into the utterance as a necessary constitutive element of its semantic structure” (Todorov, 1984, 41). Therefore, in order to get closer to the meanings, one should consider the situations and utterances which are articulated in that context.

The article aims to have a close look at the notion of silence and dialogue, in its different forms, in Kundera's Identity, considering Bakhtin's Dialogics. Therefore, this article tries to find under which masks silence and dialogue are hidden in the novel; the analytic tool, as mentioned previously, is Bakhtin's dialogical theory, that comprises the concepts of outsideness, otherness, answerability, and the equality of participants.

DISCUSSIONS

Silence is always known in its conventional form of not speaking. Although such moments exist in the novel, silence is not limited to these moments, and it interferes between the couple in other transformed and unconventional forms. According to Voloshinov “dialogue can be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face, vocalized, verbal communication between two persons, but also all verbal communication, whatever its form” (1983, 113), so does silence. Some scholars including Morson and Emerson (1990, 40) observed that, contrary to a widespread misconception, dialogue for Bakhtin is not simply a verbal act of interaction (Hall, et. al, 2005, 163). In fact, “an utterance for Bakhtin, can refer to any “complex of signs”, from a spoken phrase to a poem, or a song, or play or film” (Stam et. al, 1992, 208).

Writing about Kundera's writing style Terry Eagleton says that in Kundera's novels there's always a profoundly ironic sense of identities, "a suspicion that they are in some covert way variations upon a single theme" (Eagleton, 2003, 50-1). Kundera applies suspicion not only to the characters' identity, but also to the themes. One of the themes in some of his novels including *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Identity*, and *Ignorance* is silence. He sees different forms in some covert way, as variations upon a single theme: silence. Silence can transform its usual form, and exist under different masks not to be recognized, and identified as silence. The transformed forms of silence in *Identity* are hysterical repeating, overpowering, talkativeness, and anonymous letter writing; each one would be discussed separately.

Repeating a sentence hysterically: according to Stephen Gale, repetition can be considered as a form of hysteria (Esslin, quoted in Gale, 1972, 60), "as a given individual becomes more emotionally upset, special words through his conversation more and more frequently as a preoccupation with those words, which are in themselves of little consequence, suggests an abstracted state of mind by continual reference" (Gale, 1972, 60). Take this excerpt from the novel:

Deeply disturbed, she said the same phrase again, in the hope that she could rectify what she had botched the first time around, could manage to say it lightly, like a witticism, a parody: 'Yes indeed, men don't turn to look at me anymore. No use, the phrase echoed even more dolefully than before...' 'Men don't turn to look at me anymore.' She resorted to that phrase to avert any serious discussion; she tried to say it as lightly as possible but, to her surprise, her voice was bitter and melancholy. She could feel that melancholy plastered across her face and knew, instantly, that it would be misinterpreted. (Kundera, 1998, 9, emphasis added)

As Akhutina says: "according to Bakhtin, an absolutely neutral utterance is impossible. The speaker's emotional attitude to the objective content, his/her "evaluation" determines his/her selection of the lexical, grammatical, and compositional forms for the utterance" (2003, 99). The issue which Chantal is talking about is so important to her that she tries hard to find the best intonation for her sentence so that she can make Jean-Marc understand her own word; however, "the more something is repeated the more its meaning tends to fade" (Eagleton, 2003, 51). For Bakhtin intonation is very important because it "establishes the close connection between the word and the extralinguistic context" (Voloshinov, 1976, 99). But "intonation is oriented in two directions: toward the listener, and toward the object of the utterance as if to a third living participant" (ibid, 98). The second item in orientation of intonation here makes trouble, because the more she tries to try different intonations every single time she is repeating a sentence, the more she is got in the trap of hysterically repeating a sentence.

However, since "certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Bakhtin, 1968, 66), she tries to "say it lightly, like a witticism, a parody" (Kundera, 1998, 9), but she does not know that it can be represented "more profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint" (ibid, 66). Therefore, unconsciously, she adds seriousness and bitterness to her words.

Besides, the utterance, in order to be completed, needs a circumstance in which "the speaker has told or written all that he or she wanted to say at this moment in this situation" (Bakhtin, 1978, 255). Akhutina mentions that "the main test of an utterance's completeness, of the fullness of its meaning, is whether it expresses a certain position of the speaker (2003, 100), and thus is able to "affect the positions adopted by the other participants in the conversation in response"

(Bakhtin, 1986, 261). But because such a definition of positions is not observed, it could not be completed to be answered; therefore, in a vain attempt to explain her utterance she falls into monologism.

However, although they seem to be talking about something, they are silent in fact, because they are not having a "serious discussion" (Kundera, 1998, 10) in a situation that demands it, because as "quite obviously...language is used to communicate. But it is also, and just as importantly, used for non-communication" (Gale, 1972, 20), and such repeating sentences are a sign of non-communication, as Kundera points out that "She resorted to that phrase to avert any serious discussion" (Kundera, 1998, 10); therefore, what happens between them turns to be silence.

Overpowering: "Dialogue is a concept describing communication of equals" (Hall et. al, 2005, 168), when one is talking in a way that it seems he/she is trying to impose something on someone else, he/she neglects the "answerability of the utterance" (Sempere, 2014, 90) which is a key element in making dialogues. In other words he/she does not expect any answer from the listener, because any answer from the listener might mean inclination toward disobeying. Therefore, as the equality of the participants and the answerability of the utterance are neglected, overpowering stands for a gap containing silence. Take this excerpt from the novel:

Her Husband told her: 'I don't want you falling into a depression. We should have another child right away. Then you'll forget.' You'll forget: he didn't even try to find another way to say it! That was the moment she decided to leave him. (Kundera, 1988, 12)

Their divorce is a sign of existence of silence between Chantal and her ex-husband, the event which his overpowering tone and words were the reason, because "the intoxication of power itself necessitates the capacity to deny and annihilate differences and conflicting questions which therefore cannot be asked or given serious substantial consideration" (Martin, 2001, 5). Besides, "the alien word of the other can be either 'authoritative' or 'internally persuasive'. Whereas the latter is coextensive with self-actualisation and dialogue, the former projects itself into the self in a reified way, as an object" (Robinson, 2011, 8).

According to Bakhtin, "Monologism denies the existence of another equal consciousness outside oneself, one that is equally empowered to respond, of another equal I" (1986, 318), as Bakhtin reminds: "in the monologic approach (in its limited or pure form) the other remains solely the object of one's own consciousness and does not exist as another consciousness. I do not expect an object to provide a response that could alter the world of my own consciousness. The monologue claims to be the last word" (ibid, 318).

Writing Anonymous Letters: Letters with no name and no address from the sender also means expecting no answer from the receiver, which is a form of silence, as well. When Jean-Marc started writing love letters which bear no name and no address, he meant that he only wants to admire her, he does not intend to talk to her about the issue, he does not want to receive even a word in response. He did not consider the element of the answerability of the utterance which has presupposed in making dialogues. Not considering the fact that when there is included a statement, there may also exist "its rebuttal, the response to the rebuttal, and so on, possibly ad infinitum" (Surdulescuc, 2002, 18), they fall into silence by these anonymous letters.

Writing anonymous letters is, in a way, similar to overpowering, since in both cases the other is already considered as an obedient subject, not as the "other" to be considered. Finally, writing a letter which has always been

considered as a form of dialogue during history, here becomes a form of silence by not mentioning the sender's real name and the address, which is also a defamiliarisation of the function of letter writing in this way.

Talkativeness: When someone does not have anything to say, or anyone to communicate with, he/she strikes by boredom and falls into talkativeness “to avoid any serious discussion” (Kundera, 1998, 10). In fact she/he talks so much about everything to avoid talking about something. As Harold Pinter discusses it in an essay, “there are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it...one way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness” (Pinter, 1962, 25). According to Gale, “clearly this use of language can be considered what would be categorized in psychological terminology as a defense mechanism—a means by which the individual organism tries to protect itself. This individual organism is not as likely to be attacked, at least not as likely to be successfully attacked, if it does not reveal its own weakness” (1972, 21).

Chapter 27 of the novel is where Kundera introduces what in his view is one of “the most fundamental problems of human existence: the problem of time” (Čulík, 2015):

Their problem is time - how to make time go by, go by on its own, by itself, with no effort from them, without their being required to get through it themselves, like exhausted hikers, and that's why she talks, because the words she spouts manage inconspicuously to keep time moving along, whereas when her mouth stays dosed, time comes to a standstill, emerges from the shadows huge and heavy, and it scares my poor aunt, who, in a panic, rushes to find someone she can tell how her daughter is having trouble with ... this is existence as such confronting time as such; and that confrontation, I understood, is named boredom. (1988, 27)

Accordingly, when someone is talking much, he/she is not actually talking to communicate, he/she is talking to make time go by. As it was mentioned above, language may be “used for non-communication” (Gale, 1972, 20). According to Stephen Gale, “obviously, of course, there can be silence when the characters (people) have nothing to say, but more often silence either the literal non-utterance of words or the “torrent of language” is employed to keep from saying anything” (ibid, 20).

In these four examples people do not talk or write to communicate, because communication is a two-way relationship, and the speaker expects an answer from the listener, which in Bakhtinian term is called “the other”. Also both sides should involve in a two-way conversation which make them change alongside each other. But in these examples they do not expect any answer from the listener, so there would be no real dialogue and no communication, and therefore no change.

Also dialogue can be occurred under different masks, one of them, surprisingly, would be silence; sometimes when silence is the form, dialogue can be content. Silence can be turned into dialogue under some circumstances. This is a kind of dialogue which the Bakhtinian term “hidden dialogicality” (1984, 197) suggests. Although in such speech only one person is actually speaking, “the effect of the invisible other's presence, of her unspoken words, can still be sensed in the speaker's utterances” (White, 2009, 6). In this way, dialogue can happen during inner speeches, if he/she can see the other's point of view; as Voloshinov points out, “a more careful analysis would show that the units of inner speech are wholes, somewhat reminiscent of the paragraphs of monologic speech, or whole utterances. But most of all they resemble the [individual speeches] in a dialogue” (1976, 98). Bakhtin invites to “imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the

statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person" (Bakhtin, 1984, 197). Take this situation in which Jean-Marc is experiencing an inner dialogue:

His first reaction was jealousy: how could she complain that men had lost interest in her when, that very morning, he had been willing to get himself killed on the road for the sake of being with her as soon as possible? But less than an hour later, he came around to thinking: every woman measures how much she's aged by the interest or uninterest men show in her body. Wouldn't it be ridiculous to take offence at that? (Kundera, 1988, 14)

In this excerpt Jean-Marc, as a man, could locate himself out of himself and see the other side (women generally and Chantal specifically), and it can lead the inner speaker toward understanding the "other". This is what Jean-Marc did, and consequently succeeded to make dialogue during his inner speech, because "the utterances of his inner speech are permeated also with the evaluations of actual addressees" (Voloshinov, 1976, 102).

Kundera in his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* says "if beauty is to be perceptible, it needs a certain minimal degree of silence" (1978, 64). Therefore, he does not look absolutely and positivistically to the matter of silence; the good and bad are intermingled in every subject matter in his novels, he is always suspicious about everything and questions his own themes, but the only thing he sticks to, and is certain of is the complexity as the nature of the novel itself, as he points out in his *The Art of Novel* "The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.' That is the novel's eternal truth" (1986, 30, emphasis added).

CONCLUSIONS

All of the abovementioned elements refer to the complexity by which Kundera in his novel successfully tries to apply to the subject matter of silence and dialogue. The hiding of silence under the mask of dialogue, and dialogue under the mask of silence prove Kundera's statement which "things are not as simple as you think" (*ibid*, 30). This proves the novel's eternal truth for Kundera, which he always tries to apply in his own novels. Dialogue and silence, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word, are only two examples of these complexities, he also goes on in his novels to show that reality trespasses everyone's presupposed mental frameworks.

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