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Redrawing the Lines Foreclosure: The Possibilities Presented by a Bakhtinian Outlook on the Novel

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Introduction

What if censorship begins before we even start speaking? In “Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor”, Judith Butler provides sufficient evidence of this oft-overlooked possibility, assigning this form of pre-censorship with a recycled term: foreclosure. While many other scholars limit their focus to how censorship is enacted *after* a text is produced, Butler uses foreclosure to outline the active life of censorship as it manifests itself while thoughts and speech are being formulated. In many ways, Butler’s notion of the formation of speech is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia. Both scholars have posited that our speech is never fully our own, though their theories have grown from this base in two very different directions. For Butler, the outcome of this lack of ownership is very negative and often results in a need to redraw the lines of what is and is not considered acceptable speech. Bakhtin, however, sees heteroglossia as a positive aspect of language, especially as it is dialogized in the novel. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which Butler’s foreclosure and Bakhtin’s heteroglossia intersect in order to determine the extent to which Butler’s theory is reliant on and can benefit from Bakhtin’s original theory of heteroglossia. I will also determine whether the novel, Bakhtin’s stage for dialogizing heteroglossia, may function as a platform for undermining foreclosure. In order to do this, I will first establish a theoretical base and then examine dialogized heteroglossia and foreclosure in the case of Elif Shafak’s 2006 novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Butler insists that we must find ways to alter the factors which have resulted in the foreclosure of speech; I believe that Bakhtin has given us, in his study of the novel, some of the tools necessary for doing just that.

Bakhtin’s Heteroglossia and Butler’s Foreclosure

Before focusing on the case study of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, I find it necessary to further explain both heteroglossia and foreclosure, as well as other notable similarities between Bakhtin and Butler’s theories. The term heteroglossia was first used by Bakhtin in the essay “Discourse in the Novel” in 1934 “...to describe the ‘internal stratification’ of language...” (Leitch 1188). The theory posits that discourse, even at the individual level, is full of numerous other voices. These voices cause any given discourse to function not only in its contemporary setting but also as a part of a dialogue with past and future discourses; this interaction is called dialogism. In the novel, heteroglossia are dialogized, and, as such, demonstrate the social stratification of a given society. In other words, a confrontation is staged between the speech of multiple characters as well as the narrator and author. In this way, the novel, for Bakhtin, is a “social and rhetorical (rather than an artistic) phenomenon” (De Waard lecture, 12 Feb 2007).

From this rough sketch of the basic principles of heteroglossia, the first connections between Bakhtin’s theory of discourse and Butler’s notion of foreclosure can be seen. In describing the theory of foreclosure as it relates to censorship, Butler writes: “one speaks a language that is never fully one’s own, but that language only persists through repeated occasions of that invocation” (256). Butler continues to insist that the only way to overcome foreclosure is to “redraw” the lines which it imposes and perpetuates in determining acceptable

speech (256). At first, one is struck by the resemblance to Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia in speech which the first part of this quotation demonstrates. Bakhtin's theory, stated most simply, proposes that we are always already speaking with voices which are not our own. The similarity occurs as Butler also emphasizes our lack of ownership of our own speech. The second part of the quotation is also important, however, as it is there that Butler emphasizes the dialogic nature of speech (though she does not use this term). That which qualifies as speakable discourse is perpetuated through its repeated use in discourse. As such, present speech is perpetuated by past speech and both have an impact on future speech.

Further connections between Bakhtin and Butler exist, however, in exploring Bakhtin's notions of the formation of "the speaking person", also from "Discourse in the Novel". In this section of the essay, Bakhtin posits that "the ideological becoming of a human being ... is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (341). On an even more fundamental level, however, operate two forms of discourse which work to form the basis of our relationship with the rest of the world and our own behavior (Bakhtin 342). Bakhtin has labeled these two forms of discourse as *authoritative discourse* and *internally persuasive discourse*. Authoritative discourse comes from religious, political and moral influences and is usually very straightforward in that it is easily acknowledged as influential in shaping our own discourse (342). Internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, operates behind the scenes and is not easily pinpointed. It is, according to Bakhtin, "... backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not by public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code" (342).

It is here that Butler's own theory of foreclosure once again demonstrates similarities with Bakhtinian thought. Butler writes that "to become a subject means to be subjected to a set of implicit and explicit norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject" (252). Here, explicit norms resemble Bakhtin's authoritative discourse while implicit norms can be likened to internally persuasive discourse. For both scholars, these two forms of discourse help to determine how one becomes a "speaking individual" in Bakhtinian terms or a "subject" according to Butler. The implicit and explicit norms which Butler writes of are what cause foreclosure to occur, they are part of "... a primary form of repression, one ... whose operation makes possible the formation of the subject" (Butler 255).

For Bakhtin, the distinction between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse is drawn along different lines than Butler's implicit/explicit distinction. Authoritative discourse must either be fully accepted or fully rejected, there is no room for compromise and as such no room for altering it through artistic representation (Bakhtin 343). Internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, can be overcome by the objectification of this discourse; an individual may "... liberate himself ... [by] turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons ... [exposing] the limitations of both image and discourse" (348). In other words, through artistic reworking, internally persuasive discourse can be made to lose its power both for the individual and for society. Undoubtedly, Bakhtin saw the most potential for such an artistic reworking in the genre of the novel. Butler, meanwhile, does not consider the potential good which art can do in redrawing the boundaries of foreclosure; instead, her major focus revolves around determining how foreclosure occurs. The fact that foreclosure can (and ought to be) overcome is mentioned more as a side note.

These differences in the conceptualization of subject formation are undoubtedly linked to the differences in the theoretical background which Butler comes from and the present body of theories to which Bakhtin has been tied. Bakhtin, writing in the 1930s, was heavily influenced by Formalism. Butler, writing at the end of the twentieth century, draws heavily from psychoanalytical and Foucauldian terminology and concepts. This can be especially seen in Butler's preoccupation with "power" and power relationships in the formation of speech; these are terms which Bakhtin obviously does not use (Foucault

theorized power long after Bakhtin wrote “Discourse in the Novel”). Determining the extent to which Butler’s theory relies on Bakhtin’s is, as such, not so easily done. This is further complicated by the fact that Bakhtin’s theory, while influenced by other contemporary theorists, could do no influencing itself until the 1970s. Until then, his work had existed in relative obscurity only in Russia. Because Bakhtin’s theory came to light after his death and decades after most of it was written, Bakhtin’s discourse with other theorists has been one-sided: during his lifetime, he was engaged in an active, though one-sided discourse with other theorists; after his death, this relationship has been reversed. The result is that numerous bodies of theory, such as Marxism and Structuralism have appropriated Bakhtinian theory for their own use. As such, contemporary theorists who are neither Marxist nor structuralist may be influenced by Bakhtin but do not use his vocabulary for fear of being mislabeled. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s formulations lack terms which have become staples in modern discourse – terms such as Foucault’s power and also reference to censorship as it is now conceived. Simultaneously, Bakhtin’s terminology has become central to very specific types of discourse. The active life of Bakhtinian theory after Bakhtin’s death has, in this way, been detrimental – though it does prove Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in that past, present and future theories all manage to alter each other as they interact. Just as theories today are greatly altered by Bakhtin’s writings, his own writings are themselves greatly altered when considered in light of modern theory.

Because of these differences in conceptualization, heteroglossia becomes a largely positive concept for Bakhtin while Butler’s counterpart is negative. Butler insists that we must escape the linguistic system which is robbing us of our agency in speech – in those cases when such an escape is possible. For those cases in which the censorious conditions of speech are inalterable, Butler insists we must still explore how and why this is the case (257). For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is positive as it demonstrates the plurality of the languages with which we speak. Furthermore, dialogized heteroglossia function in life to help with the formation of the speaking individual and in art as a sort of playground for the staging of discourse. By exploring the case of *The Bastard of Istanbul* in light of both Bakhtin and Butler’s theory, I hope to demonstrate how Butler’s negative image of speech formation may benefit from a Bakhtin-inspired reworking.

Case Study

Before discussing Elif Shafak’s 2006 *The Bastard of Istanbul* as it relates to Bakhtin and Butler, I will first provide a brief plot summary along with the details of the novel’s reception and impact in Turkey. *The Bastard* is largely set in modern-day Turkey and the United States, though the beginning of the book is placed in both countries twenty years earlier. Also, several flashbacks throughout the book are set during 1915 and the following decade as they tell the story of victims of the Armenian Genocide. The two main characters are Armanoush, a young Armenian-American woman, and Asya, a nineteen-year-old Turkish girl. Armanoush travels without her family’s knowledge to Istanbul in order to discover what it means to be an Armenian. She stays there with Asya’s family, including four aunts, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. Expecting to encounter hatred in her Turkish hosts and Turkish people in general when she reveals her Armenian background, Armanoush is instead met largely with ignorance concerning what happened between the Turks and Armenians in the 1910s.

The Armenian Genocide remains a highly controversial topic, especially as the Turkish government, and many others, deny that it occurred while other nations have enacted or have considered enacting laws to make it illegal to deny the genocide. As a result of comments made by characters in the book about Turkey’s role in the genocide, Shafak was tried under the Turkish constitution for breaking the law by degrading Turkishness (“Who to” 77). If convicted, Shafak could have faced up to three years in prison; however, as the

statements in question were issued by fictional characters, Shafak was ultimately acquitted ("Who to" 77). One such statement, made early in the novel, was issued by Armanoush's Armenian great uncle who comments on the "...genocide survivors who lost all their relatives at the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915 ..." (Shafak 53).

While Shafak's trial is an example of censorship seeking to exert itself after the displeasing text has been produced, foreclosure is undoubtedly also at work in Shafak's representation of characters and events relating to the Armenian genocide. Denial of the genocide in Turkey functions implicitly on many levels: denial of its occurrence is not perpetuated by law but rather by an almost-unspeakable rule which is perpetuated through both purposeful and accidental ignorance. In the novel, Asya's family is truly perplexed when faced with the details of the genocide; it is something of which they have never heard. Shafak herself is a Turkish woman who grew up in this environment of denial; in order for the genocide to become an appropriate topic for this work of fiction, the lines of foreclosure must have already been slightly redrawn. For Butler, the way in which the genocide has been foreclosed upon in speech would be an example of implicit censorship at its best (or worst) because there are no laws pertaining directly to it; when laws are formed in order to suppress undesirable speech, that very speech is perpetuated in legal and public discourse (Butler 250-251). Instead of a law referring specifically to the genocide, a more general law against degrading Turkishness can be substituted in order to try offenders. Because declaration of the Armenian genocide *as* genocide can fall under this law without the law ever having to refer to the genocide itself, foreclosure in this case is incredibly effective.

However, implicit censorship is, as shown above, strongly related to Bakhtin's concept of internally persuasive discourse. Herein lies the positive: according to Bakhtin, internally persuasive discourse can be overcome through the artistic objectification of that speech. By embodying this discourse as an individual, an author can expose this discourse as being limited, manipulative or blatantly wrong. It is precisely the "double-voiced and double-langued" nature of the novel which makes it the perfect genre for the objectification of internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin 348). Though he does not name it specifically in this particular essay, it is here that Bakhtin's notion of how heteroglossia is dialogized in the novel becomes useful in terms of redrawing the lines of foreclosure. In returning to *The Bastard of Istanbul*, there arise two major questions imperative to a Bakhtinian reading of foreclosure in the novel: how does Shafak objectify internally persuasive speech? and how does dialogizing heteroglossia help in this objectification and in the ultimate goal of redrawing the lines of foreclosure?

The first question is undoubtedly the simplest to answer. Shafak objectifies internally persuasive speech in the form of several entities. The most notable of these is in the form of Asya's aunt Banu's djinni, Mr. Bitter. Djinn are small demons which help Auntie Banu, as a soothsayer, to tell the future. Banu has two djinn, one is malicious (Mr. Bitter) while the other is good-spirited (Mrs. Sweet). Mr. Bitter is a type of djinni which has existed as long as history and which has witnessed every human suffering which has ever occurred, including the suffering of Armanoush's family during the Armenian genocide. As such, Mr. Bitter is able to give Auntie Banu specific information concerning the plight of Armanoush's family. Mr. Bitter functions effectively as an objectified version of internally persuasive discourse as he comes to represent the individuals who sought to destroy the Armenians. He is revealed as callous and evil and is made ridiculous through being artistically represented as an evil little demon which must adhere to the will of his master, the fat Auntie Banu.

The second way in which Shafak objectifies internally persuasive speech in order to de-center it is in the form of Armanoush's step-father (who is, as it turns out, both Asya's uncle and father) Mustafa. This particular objectification is not made apparent, however, until very late in the story when Mustafa, a Turkish male, is made to represent the Turkish

oppressors of the Armenians through the revelation of the fact that he beat and raped Zeliha, Asya's mother and his sister. The problem with the way in which Shafak objectifies this discourse in the form of Mustafa is that his character, to this point, has been largely ambivalent and the resolution of his crime – his suicide – is actually both sudden and anti-climactic at the same time. As such, Mustafa does not function ideally as an objectified internally persuasive discourse; the artistic reworking which shapes his character is not enough to prove the limits of the discourse.

The second question I have posed (how does dialogizing heteroglossia help in the objectification of internally persuasive discourse and in the ultimate goal of redrawing the lines of foreclosure) is much more difficult to answer. Shafak's control of the dialogized heteroglossia in her novel is at times quite strong: Shafak writes the novel in English though much of the speech would actually be taking place in Turkish. Here there exists the first staged confrontation between heteroglossia in the novel as Shafak must effectively represent patterns in Turkish discourse through the English language. Shafak must also create realistic dialogue for a multitude of characters – those who could be identified as Western or Eastern, Christian or Muslim, young or old. It is more important, however, to consider the fact that the statements which were being censored in Turkey's trial of Shafak were dialogized heteroglossia. Significantly, by virtue of their being made by fictional characters, the law against degrading Turkishness was deemed inapplicable to these comments. As such, the artistic function of the dialogized heteroglossia was given precedence over its social and rhetorical function. This emphasis on fictionalization, coupled with the disclaimer which Shafak's publisher places at the beginning of the novel – "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual person, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental" – functions to limit Shafak's ability to redraw the lines of foreclosure by means of dialogized heteroglossia. In order for dialogized heteroglossia to function most fully in the novel, they must retain their power of social influence and not be considered merely as a function of art.

Conclusions

Just because it is possible to redraw the lines which result in foreclosure by means of the novel, it does not mean that every novel is or will be successful in doing so. While Shafak has not been as successful in redrawing the lines of foreclosure as one might hope, she has succeeded in bringing the issue of the Armenian genocide into many more Turkish homes. The novel was, before Shafak's trial, a bestseller in Turkey. As *The Bastard of Istanbul* is translated into more languages and released to more countries, awareness of the Armenian genocide and its subsequent denial will undoubtedly increase. However, when considering the possibilities for change which Bakhtin locates in the genre of the novel, it is impossible to be satisfied with such a limited positive outcome.

Likewise, Butler may be criticized for not realizing the full potential of her own theory; I find it unfortunate that she is less interested in discovering how to overcome foreclosure than in determining how foreclosure occurs. Certainly, a consideration of the power which the novel holds in redrawing the lines of foreclosure through artistic reworking, especially objectification and dialogized heteroglossia, would make a useful addition to Butler's essay. Nonetheless, Butler's contribution to the censorship debate has been significant. Without considering foreclosure and its role as an implicit censor, efforts to change what is considered acceptable speech would be far too focused on reception. Understanding the role which censorship and heteroglossia play in the production of speech and of subjects (or speaking persons) is fundamental in redrawing the lines of foreclosure. With the significant amount of new theory that has been generated in recent decades, it is a

testament to Bakhtin that we can still benefit from his theories of the 1930s in order to conceptualize how the rules which govern the formation of acceptable speech may be altered in order to “rule in” new types of speech. The potential function which the novel can fulfill in redrawing the lines of foreclosure necessitates further consideration.

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