

47. The renovation of the self by the other in Iris Murdoch's carnivalesque *The Italian Girl* (1964)

Hasibe AMBARCIOĐLU¹

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Abstract

Bakhtin (1895-1975), who was a Russian literary critic and philosopher, has made significant contributions to the terminology of literary theory, such as dialogism, polyphony and carnivalism. He examined the works of Dostoevsky to unpack the difference between Dostoevsky's oeuvre and the other homophonic, that is single voiced novels. In these novels, characters are set and fixed whereas Dostoevsky's characters are unfinalizable and they are defined 'by the word of the other, so that the plot is drawn within the interaction between the characters not by the authorial ideal. In his *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin underlines two important terms, 'carnival' as a social institution and grotesque realism as a literary mode. Carnivalism is used to refer to the collectivity of the society, that is people forming a unity coming from different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. Throughout a carnival, an individual is renewed by exchanging bodies through wearing masks and costumes. Here, the focus seems to be on the awareness of one's sensual, material, bodily unity and community. By focusing on the body, Bakhtin combines the carnival with the grotesque which determines the carnival's stress on the bodily changes through eating, evacuation and sexuality. Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), who has unpredictable plots with characters from different layers of society and undermines the ideal civilized upper-class communities, has presented her reader with the themes of morality, good and evil in her novels. The aim of this paper is to read *The Italian Girl* (1964) using Bakhtinian criticism to interpret the renewal of her characters after they have connected the characters stigmatised as 'the Other' in the society, like the Jewish siblings who come from Russia and the Italian Girl, the governess of the family.

Keywords: Bakhtin, dialogism, polyphony, carnivalism, Iris Murdoch, the Other

Iris Murdoch'un karnavalesk *İtalyan Kızı* (1964) adlı romanında özün diğeri tarafından yenilenmesi

Öz

Rus edebiyat eleřtirmeni ve filozof Bakhtin (1895-1975) edebiyat teorisi terminolojisine diyalojizm, çokseslilik, ve karnavalizm gibi önemli katkılarda bulunmuřtur. Dostoyevski'nin çalışmalarını Dostoyevski'nin eserleri ve diğeri homofonik tek sesli romanlarla arasındaki farkı incelemiřtir. Bu romanlarda, karakterler oturmuř ve sabittir, ancak Dostoyevski'nin karakterleri sonlandırılmaz ve eserdeki diğeri'nin sözüyle tanımlanır; bu yüzden kurgu yazar idealine deđil karakterler arasındaki etkileřime göre çizilir. *Rabelais ve Dünyası* (1965) adlı eserinde Bakhtin iki önemli terimin altını çizmiřtir: toplumsal bir kurum olarak 'karnaval' ve edebi bir mod olarak grotesk gerçekeçilik. Karnavalizm farklı sosyoekonomik ve ırksal altyapılardan gelen insanların birlik oluřturmasını

¹ Öğr. Gör., Atılım Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü (Ankara, Turkey), hambarcioglu@firat.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1052-1729 [Arařtırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 21.01.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.03.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1105605]

kasteden toplum kolektivitesi için kullanılır. Karnaval boyunca, bir birey maske takarak ve kostüm giyerek vücut alışverişi sayesinde yenilenir. Burda, vurgu bireyin duygusal, maddesel ve vücutsal birliği ve topluluğu üzerine olmaktadır. Vücuda odaklanarak Bakhtin karnavalı ve yeme, boşaltma ve cinsellik aracılığıyla karnavalın önemini vücutsal değişimler olarak belirleyen groteskle birleştirir. Toplumun farklı katmanlarından karakterleriyle tahmin edilemez kurguları olan ve ideal medeni yüksek-üst sınıfın altını kazan Iris Murdoch, romanlarında okuyucusuna ahlak, iyi ve kötü temalarını sunmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı İtalyan Kızı'nı (1964) Bakhtin eleştirisiyle okumak ve karakterlerin Rusya'dan gelen Yahudi kardeşler ve ailenin mürebbiyesi İtalyan Kızı gibi toplumda diğeri olarak kabul edilen karakterlerle iletişime geçtikten sonra değişen karakterlerinin yeniden kimlik kazanımını yorumlamaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Bakhtin, diyalojizm, çokseslilik, karnivalizm, Iris Murdoch, öteki

Introduction

Bakhtin (1895-1975) as one of the prolific thinkers of the twentieth century foregrounds Dostoevsky's novels to probe how literature makes use of different social sources in order to intertwine discourses. He is influential on the literary and cultural studies in the way that he improvises literary language with concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony and the carnival in his theory. His theory stems from the notion that all words come together in dialogues with other words (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, p. 693). Bakhtin's aim as a Russian formalist critic is to evaluate the literary works debasing the cultural theory of ideologies to raise the consciousness of the Other in the society who is assumed to be the outcast not taking place in the history. Bearing these in mind, to shade the effect of capitalism in Russia, he studies polyphonic novel so as to problematise the monologic structure of the language declaring dialogic types of genre. In this aspect, he reinterprets Socratic and Platonic dialogues in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) to make a comparison between the monologic discourse which is single voiced and dialogic discourse which is double voiced. The difference between these two discourses is in the former one only accepts itself and its object ignoring other people's words to construct the semantic authority within the borders of a given context (Bakhtin, 1984, p.185-189). On the contrary, dialogic discourse contains a deliberate reference to the words of someone else embedding a new semantic intention to the discourse which already has its own intention (Bakhtin, 1984, p.195). Within his perspective, like other kinds of utterance, literary texts are produced and read as a result of the activity of the author and their importance in the social and historical context. In the meantime, a simultaneous dialogue is seen between the author and his characters and readers, in addition; the same kind of simultaneous communication occurs in the dialogue of the reader with the characters and their author. The simultaneity of these dialogues is only an instance of the bigger polyphony of social and discursive forces that Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" (Holquist, 2002, p.67).

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), who is both a philosopher and a novelist, has written twenty-six remarkable novels and has studied existentialism and ethics emphasizing the idea of the good as a moral value. Murdoch has asserted that her philosophy may be a variety of moral psychology which is based on "recovering a philosophical description of the mind or consciousness as a bearer of value or moral being and not merely a neutral surveyor of the facts" (Antonaccio, 2000, p.97). In her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), she clearly defines that consciousness or self-being is the fundamental mode or form of being (p.97). *The Italian Girl* (1964) is a "[short, closed and crystalline novel with a first-person male narrator and multiple sexual relationships and attractions between the small cast of characters" (Martin and Rowe, 2010, p.72). It is both a family and Gothic

romance whose setting is the condolence house of the narrator, Edmund returning home after his mother's death. The story consists of Freudian siblings, separations within the family and substitutions in the pairings of the characters as a result of the renovation of their identity as subjects that occurs as a result of the coming of refugee Russian Jewish siblings to work for them. Each character has its own binary opposition and changes in order to be 'a morally good person' with the incidences of love, death, and sex to recognise the Other.

1. Bakhtin's polyphonic novel and carnival

Craig Brandist (2002) notes that Dostoevsky in his polyphonic novels finds a way for the authorial voice not to impose a determinist logic on the characters, providing the characters with a durable communication of discourse with the others in the narrative, while the narrator is not willing or capable of presenting any authorial intensions (p. 94). Suffice to say, for Bakhtin, the polyphonic novels consist of a plurality of disparate consciousness that is a gathering of valid voices which are not thoroughly under the control of the omniscient authorial or narrational voice, making the novel multi-voiced. Each character is equally significant and his/her utterance in the novel is as important as the author's voice and other characters. In accordance with this, Dostoevsky's aim is to represent the self-consciousness of the hero whose discourse is about himself and his world. The hero generally enters a setting where monologic discourse is in control, and hence he is excluded and devalued by the others. In this condition, the hero tries to prove his importance through his speech and action during the narration but he discovers that he cannot have a fixed and powerful position within this environment. In the end, he is either mocked and sent away or accepted by the monologists with whom he is in contact. Only dialogic communication is the one between the hero and the author (Brandist, 2002, p.96).

The Italian Girl (1964) tells us the comic and ironic incidents and relationships within a family during and after the funeral of Lydia, who is Otto and Edmund's mother. They are from an English upper-class family, Otto is a stonemason and Edmund is an engraver. Their father, John Nerraway was also a stonemason and leftist artist. Otto is unhappily married with Isabel, who is a melancholic woman drinking all they in her room and they have a teenage daughter called Flora. These characters are all characters forming the centripetal forces of the text, while Otto's Jewish apprentice, David Levkin and his sister, Elsa, who turns out to have fled from Russia because of the oppression on them and Maggie, the Italian Girl, who is the governess of Edmund and Otto are representatives of the 'Other' that is centrifugal coming from different countries and ethnicity. These outcasts of the society live within the family having dialogic relationships with the central characters changing the inner bonds of the family. Edmund, the narrator and the hero, returns his home for the funeral his mother and tells the reader his simple life and his job:

I lived a very simple life solitary life, but on the other hand I also earned very little money. The art of the wood –engraver may be deep but it is narrow...But I had never become a fashionable or well-known engraver and in that sense established. I was not ambitious. No type face bore my name. Perhaps I simply lacked talent...But my relations with women always followed a certain disastrous and finally familiar pattern (Murdoch, 2018, p.20-21).

Edmund is a solipsist who has escaped from his dominant mother, Lydia and his brother, Otto. When he returns home he learns about the secrets of his family members. With each of them, he has a differing dialogue not being able to change their lives or his importance for them. After the funeral, they all expect him to go back to his solitary life but he cannot leave until he decides to have a relationship with his governess, the Italian girl, Maria Magistretti. Edmund and Otto are lonely characters and despite being married to Isabel, Otto is not happy in his marriage. Isabel belittles Edmund, who is a controlled,

teetotal, vegetarian and takes off her dress to the waist to kiss him and embarrass him (Martin and Rowe, 2010, p.72). Edmund, as a Bakhtinian hero, is a neutral character who is despised by the others and does not have the ability to solve problems within the family. Although he is neutral, the lives of all the characters and their 'selves' change including their sexuality.

According to Bakhtin the root of the polyphonic novel dates back to the serio-comic genres of laughter and to the carnivalesque mode of discourse in the Renaissance concluding with the subversion of the accepted ideologies and official discourses. Heteroglot novels with characters in pursuit of their wishes subvert the class difference with its carnivalesque setting where lower and higher class people come together (Glazener, 1993, p.112). Bakhtin states that in the Middle Ages official feasts kept the fixed hierarchy and people did not get out of the existing world life. Thus, the atmosphere of the official feasts was serious and there was not much laughter in it. On the other hand, carnival was the opposite of official feasts of the Church presenting a second life to the people:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 686).

Bakhtin renders that during the carnival people used a different language special to the carnival without the borders of class difference making everybody equal. For him, carnival is a marketplace emancipating people of their etiquette and titles leaving no distance between people enabling them to use honest and free gesture. This kind of carnivalesque marketplace interaction is often presented in Rabelais' novel (Bakhtin, 2004, p.687). In this aspect, carnival becomes a second life but not a negative parody of the modern times. During the carnival the material body is foregrounded as a result of folk culture and the concept of grotesque realism. In grotesque realism, the bodily element is assumed to be positive representing people through their bodies in an exaggerated way.

It is usually pointed out that in Rabelais' work the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role. Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form... (Bakhtin, 2004, p.687).

Although bodily actions like eating, drinking, and sexual life are exaggerated, Bakhtin interprets it as positive, using these bodily images for the themes of fertility, growth, abundance. In other words, these bodily images are not the representations of the lonely biological individuals but the collective ancestral body of all the people. While being gay and festive, the fundamental principle of grotesque realism is the degradation of all in life that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract as the bodily images refer to the transfer to the material level. This degradation brings laughter to degrade and materialize what is accepted to be high and spiritual in the society (Bakhtin, 2004, p.687).

Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one (Bakhtin, 2004, p.687).

To put it another way, degradation of oneself with sexual affairs, pregnancy and birth concludes with the renewal of the self in the flow of the plot. Murdoch's work, *The Italian Girl* is a story of family's secrets unfolding after the funeral of Lydia, the narrator's and Otto's brother. The family house is the

carnavalesque smarketplace holding together different characters who is in despair with their loves and gets stuck in sexual relationships with Otto's apprentice, David and his sister. There are two different classes living together in the house, the higher class is the Narraways who are English and the Others coming from other natiionalities, Russian David, his sister Elsa, and the Italian governess, Maggie, who change the family order in the house. Edmund, as the guest, learns the secrets of Otto, Isabel and Flora who are unhappy in the family clashing with each other and searching for happiness by having sex with the Russian siblings. Degradation starts when Edmund learns that his niece, Flora who is very young and pregnant, thus she plans to have an abortion when they talk to each other alone:

"What's the matter?" I was troubled by her wild look and by the solitude.

...

"I am pregnant."

I stared at her. It was not possible. Then I felt a violent flush as if a warm cloth had been thrown round my head. I blushed with shock, with shame, and an obscure and fierce distress. (Murdoch, 2018, p.54)

Astonishing may it seem, Otto's marriage is loose in which the couple resists divorcing but living apart in the house. Otto does not care about his wife and his daughter. Their family does not suit to the norms of patriarchal family. Everybody in the house knows his sexual affair with Elsa, who is a hysterical woman affected by her painful past in Russia. There is not hierarchy in the house and David is the enchanter who influences anybody with his charm also controlling his boss. Otto is usually a drunk man who likes eating representing the bodily pleasures and does not respect marriage anymore. He does not resemble his brother and says to him: "Well, you're the one that watches and I'm the one that eats. I eat and eat and drink and drink. I try to swallow the world" (p. 41). He regrets having married and drinks all the time and sleeps with Elsa, having bodily satisfaction with her:

"It's a miracle. It's completely changed me. My whole body. I know I look like th wreck of Hesperus, but I feel radiant, as if I had an angelic body. While with Isabel- well, Isabel always made me feel disgusting. I was a pig, I felt unclean. With Elsa- everything I am and do is beautiful. Oh, I can't explain" (Murdoch, 2018, p.83).

His relationship with Elsa binds him to the earth and he feels only human. His relationship with her renews him through their laughter. On the other hand, as said before, sex is not the only thing that changes him. Elsa dies as the house gets burned because of Isabel and her death again changes him to be a normal father taking care of his daughter, Flora. Narraways' house is the setting for the dialogic relationships between English characters and the Others. Their sexual affairs, loves, friendship and death serve as a medium to find their 'selves'. In contrast to Otto, his wife Isabel does not laugh too much and has an affair with his apprentice, like her daughter she learns that she is pregnant at the end of the novel from David Levkin and she gets divorced from Otto and decides to move to Scotland, her own country. The affairs in the house are parodic that although everybody knows whose lovers are David Levkin and Elsa, nobody is angry with them. The relations in the family are not suitable for a normal family. Isabel is a melancholic, drunken and unhappy woman in her marriage from the beginning to the end and when she talks to her brother-in-law Edmund she tries to seduce him by taking of her clothes:

She stood quite still looking up at me with a sort of dazed ferocious expression, with vague yearning eyes, her mouth drooping open. I looked at her breasts. It was years since I had seen a woman's breasts. It was years since I had seen a woman's breasts. Then I took the linen stuff, which she was holding wide apart, and drew it gently and firmly together again. I felt her little hands fluttering inside mine (Murdoch,2018, p.97).

Edmund, the narrator is charmed by his niece and tempted by his sister-in-law. 'The body' is in the foreground to make the characters feel human as there is not any utterance or interaction between them otherwise. Despite knowing that David Levkin is the seducer to her daughter, Flora, she also has a sexual affair with him and in the end gets pregnant and decides to bear the baby. On the other hand, her daughter gets an abortion. She is not astonished when Edmund asks her about Flora's pregnancy:

"Isabel, do you know about Flora?"

"So you feel it your duty to tell me?"

"So you know?"

"That Flora was pregnant? Oh yes, yes."

"And did you, do you, know who it was that made her so?"

"Yes. David Levkin. He's probably listening at the door at this moment" (Murdoch, 2018, 120).

Isabel assumes that David sleeps with Flora to envy her. In fact, David abuses both Isabel and Flora. This emphasis "on the lower part of the body" is one of the striking features of the carnival (Morris, This is only a means to change the authority in the house. This carnivalesque house becomes normal with the death of Elsa as David leaves for Russia.

2. Decentralizing The Power of Heteroglossia

Pam Morris states that all languages of heteroglossia are "specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, and meanings and values." (2003, p.115). These languages can intersect one another, can mutually live in one another, contradict one another or can be interconnected dialogically. So as to say, they co-exist in the consciousness of real people-initially in the consciousness of authors. As a result, "these languages live a real life and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia" (p.115). Thus, they take place in the unitary plane novel combining "parodic stylizations of generic languages, various forms of stylizations and illustrations of professional and period-bound languages, the languages of particular generations, of social dialects and others" (p.123). In this aspect, heteroglossia is formed in the novel in person to speak and "it determines, as a dialogizing context, the special resonance of novelistic discourse" (p.123). In the novel, a speaking human being declares his/her own ideological discourse, their own language, so as a result of the dialogical discourse in the novel, every characters renovates himself/herself.

Iris Murdoch has created her characters who decentralize the power at home from different nationalities and in a way she deconstructs the themes of love, marriage, sexuality, gender and history to create a new identity for the characters. Each character utters his/her ideas freely. As a heteroglot novel, in *The Italian Girl*, Maggie, the governess, is the key character in the novel balancing the Narraways' relations as she solves the problems within the family. After their mother Lydia dies, Otto and Edmund learn that Lydia has left all her possessions to Maggie, her lover. All of the family know that they had a relationship, but they regard Maggie as her friend. Maggie changes in the end and decides to go to Rome with Edmund as they fall in love and Edmund feels himself like Otto, who is more energetic, and loves eating and sex and recognizes that he will play the fool's part in life now. He is tempted by Maggie when they are alone and he chooses a new life to have earthly satisfaction in life:

What was value? What had been the value, of my long meditation? I had had no power here to heal the ills of others, I had merely discovered my own. I had thought to have passed beyond life, but now it seemed to me that I had simply evaded it. I had not passed beyond anything; I was a false religious, a frightened man (Murdoch, 2018, 198).

Edmund is a solipsistic, introverted man and falls in love with his lesbian Italian governess when she confesses her feelings for him. The interaction between them renews their identities. As a heteroglot novel, all the characters use words from their own language during their dialogic discourse with other, as in the example of David Levkin. The Russian Jewish siblings David and Elsa, with their painful past, come and tempt Otto's family. Elsa is a hysterical, depressive young girl, who has been seduced by Otto. She cannot recover her memories in Russia and David explains this with the following words as an ideological discourse:

You see there are two kinds of Jews," Levkin went on, walking very close just behind me. "There are the Jews that suffer and the Jews that succeed, the dark Jews and the light Jews. She is a dark Jew. I am a light Jew. I will work, I will succeed. I will succeed in art, or else in business, perhaps in art business. I will earn enormous money. I will not remember. (Murdoch, 2018, 76).

Although he has come to London to be happy, after his sister dies, he wants to go to his own country and thinks that he cannot succeed at anything there. Ken Hirschkop argues that as each language is a voice, then society is a knot of juxtaposing groups and various ideologies. Each voice has an interesting point of view, including a group of values and desires (Hirschkop, 1993, 20). David Levkin, after his sister's death, finds it meaningless to stay in London and decides to go back to his own country, like the Italian girl. He discovers that he cannot have the life he wants in London:

Well so. But I am useless here. You may not understand, but nothing means anything to me outside Russia. Your language is dry, dry in my mouth. Here I am a non-man, I should become here a clown, a nothing, some man's toy, as I might have been your brother's toy if he had wished it. I would rather die than be a meaningless man (Murdoch, 2018, 175).

3. Conclusion

Ultimately, Bakhtin in his works has examined Dostoevsky's novels to untangle the difference of his works from the others as Dostoevsky presents how literature is embedded with social and ideological discourses. His theories are used in literary and cultural studies as his aim, with the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony and the carnival, is to reveal the consciousness of the Other in order to change the identities of human beings by means of interaction with other people. In Dostoevsky's novels each character has her/his right to speak and declare her/his ideas changing the other. In Iris Murdoch's *The Italian Girl*(1964) it can be deduced that Bakhtin's notion of the carnival has been used as a vehicle to gather unhappy members of a family for the funeral to discover that each member of Otto's family has a sexual relationship with David Levkin and his sister. They change by means of their interaction with each other and in the end with Elsa's death Otto and Isabel decide to divorce and Otto stays with his daughter. In the novel each character renews herself/himself to change their lives with the help of the Other as in the example of Edmund, who is the solipsistic religious narrator, chooses to live in Rome with the Italian governess, Maggie, who was his mother's lover. The dialogic discourse in the novel has broken the circular plot of sexual relationships with the death of Elsa and Lydia. In the novel, by means of "the body" and its reproductive functions, Iris Murdoch has parodied the idea of marriage, love, and family creating a new order for each character.

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