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BAKHTIN'S AND JAKOBSON'S POETICS: AN INTERSECTION OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND FORMALISM

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Abstract

The present study aims to prove that Roman Jakobson and Michael Bakhtin tried to provide the Carrefour between hazy abstractions of philosophy and exclusively descriptive and positivistic formalism of linguistics. The research seeks parallels between Bakhtin's and Jakobson's theoretical positions regarding language and literary devices. It purports to use phenomenology as a framework to see the formalist positions of both. It proves, however, that these writers shared certain commonalities as well as differences. Although they both contributed towards developing a Formalist literary and linguistic tradition, they diverged in significant ways about phenomenological positions. The research paper proves that Jakobson enriched Formalist literary criticism by adding Structuralism flavour to it, whereas Bakhtin refurbished Formalism by conjugating it with the sociological conception of literary criticism.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Formalism, Dialogism, Dominant, Bakhtin, Jakobson

Introduction and Background

Phenomenology refers to a major philosophical movement of the 20th century. The term originates from the word *Phaino* which was used in Greek as a verb which means to bring to light or the practice to appear. Its direct translation is a science of appearances (Peter; 2008: 4). Phenomenology, as it is used in Hegel's (1977) philosophical system, refers to many of the manifestations of consciousness. The term phenomenology of mind refers to the study of the several phases that human consciousness passes through en route to achieving full self-awareness. Phenomenology had not come to be recognized as the name of a philosophical school till the first phase of the 20th century when Edmund Husserl popularized the term in his writings. Raman Selden in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* writes that psychologism practised in literary debates reduces knowledge to the individual human mind (Minnis and Johnson; 2005). This reduction ultimately results in a conception of relative truth, which stands in contrast to Husserl's (1970) concept of truth, which is absolute. Husserl (1970) posits that there is no such thing as relative truth. He has more faith in the self-contained nature of truth and its eternal nature. According to Husserl (1970), psychology is a scientific discipline that constructs rules based on empirical evidence and deductive reasoning. Phenomenology in contrast does not rely on an examination of empirical facts of psychic life. He made 'intentionality' a cornerstone of his phenomenological theory. He postulates that consciousness is not a passive recipient of stimulus from the external world. On the contrary, it stands for several 'psychic acts or intentional experiences'. Intentionality constitutes an intentional object from a swarm of sensory perceptions. An object itself is what is registered in our consciousness; rather, it is the experience of the deliberate act. The concept that Husserl (1970) calls 'intuition' is the other fundamental tenet of his

philosophical system. Under the framework of phenomenological theory, intuition gives us the ability to discern essences rather than just empirical features. Because if perception were limited to actual aspects, then human knowledge would be contingent, and Husserl (1970)'s goal was to obtain everlasting knowledge, his hypothesis states that perception cannot be limited to empirical features.

Russian Formalism sought to establish the study of literature as a scientific study, tidying up the literary field of unnecessary 'authorial-biographical', cultural history and psychologist entanglements, one which has at its disposal its autonomous methods and procedures, second, these methods were to be used to find what constituted 'literariness'. In particular situations, the goal of formalist aesthetics and linguistics was to identify the aesthetic and linguistic characteristics that set literature and poetry apart from other kinds of speech, in particular from what is known as ordinary language.

Hence Formalism steered the course of literary studies far away from content to its form. In Formalist's hands 'device' became the cardinal instrument to judge the worth of a literary artefact. It was the device that made the 'automatized' occurrences of objects and processes register on the consciousness of people. Hence 'the device of art became the device of DE familiarization' of objects and it made the form not only difficult but rather it increased the difficulty and prolonged the perception.

With its overemphasis on form and literariness, Formalism did not have an underlying theory of how aesthetics in general functions, so it failed to say how human cognition was able to distinguish between 'everyday' constructs and 'aesthetic constructs'. Without considering how the human mind processes information about objects or other people Formalism was not able to discern the difference between the human reaction to 'normal' or everyday

stimuli, and those that were supposed to be estranged. The detractors of Formalism see it as a real crisis in the theory. [Michael Bakhtin \(1981\)](#) with his theory of 'dialogism' and [Roman Jakobson \(1987\)](#) with his relentless single-mindedness pushed the notion of Formalism away from its isolated and unitary position towards an integrated approach known as 'phenomenological structuralism' ([Holenstein, 1976: 4](#)).

[Peter Steiner \(2008\)](#) writes that Formalist's incorporation into major institutes of learning (after the Russian Revolution) helped to germinate 'centrifugal tendencies' within Russian Formalism and helped produce a diversity of critical approaches. The Moscow School was renovated into 'The Prague School of Linguistics' with its leading member [Roman Jakobson \(1987\)](#). Prague scholars were generally and Roman Jakobson was particularly influenced by [Husserl \(1970\)](#)'s philosophy. This 'intellectual cross-pollination' germinated a Formal –philosophical school, which refurbished scores of concepts and transformed methods programmatically scorned by the Formalists.

Formalism emphasized that in studying a phenomenon as an a priori definition of essences is not required. What is important on the contrary, is to be aware of their linkages. They understand poetics to be a field of study that concentrates on the phenomena of literature rather than the study of literature's substance. In contrast to that [Jakobson \(1987\)](#) refuted such a mode of inquiry and termed it an 'ad-hoc' procedure which was the 'modus operandi of traditional poetics. Hence he writes:

Until now, the literary historian has looked like a policeman who, in trying to arrest a person, would, just in case, grab everyone and everything from his apartment, as well as accidental passers-by on the street.'(Qt. in [Steiner, "Russian Formalism", 2008: 38](#))

Analysis and Discussion

[Jakobson \(1987\)](#) insists that the pursuit of 'accidental phenomenon and leaving aside

literary essence' is not a scientific inquiry. Hence he writes that the object of literary science is not literature but literariness, i.e. what makes a given work a literary work. Instead of relying only on thematic grounds, he developed a theory of phonology. He believed that the poeticity of a word springs from its 'imaginative nature'. A word can conjure a numerosity of meanings. Scholars who adhered to the formalist school of thought characterized poetic language in line with the mechanical model. This meant that all verbal actions were classified into mutually exclusive dialects based on the function that they served in the context of communication. Because of this, [Jakobson \(1987\)](#) rejected the idea that there is a division between poetry and everyday language that is called common people language. He insisted that meaning is an integral component of verbal communication and its segregation will compromise the linguistic nature of the message.

Equipped with insights provided by contemporary phenomenology and phonology, [Jakobson \(1987\)](#) refurbished and animated the existent linguistic model. He was particularly influenced by the discussion of the linguistic sign and their multiple functions in [Husserl's \(1970\) *Logical Investigation*](#) which proved seminal in its impact on [Jakobson's \(1987\) 'phenomenological Structuralism'](#). [Husserl \(1970\)](#) states that in communication; locutions are indices and intimate the speaker's state of mind. However, these indices operate only within an empirical context. Words are free and they are not bound by empirical context because linguistic signals do not just act as markers, as Husserl contends, but also as meaning-intended statements, they are endowed with an a priori meaning. He gave the following definition of poetry's fundamental characteristic: "a mental orientation towards expression". [Jakobson \(1987\)](#) depicts Husserl's (1970) theory of poetics by refuting Formalism's binary oppositions of functional dialectics of

phone/meaning. To him, verbal poetics functions with expression, it cannot exist without meaning. So, he brought forth his dialectic: the emotive that is always directed towards the speaker and the practical always directed towards the expression itself. For him 'phonemes are intrinsically semantic because their main function is to differentiate between different meanings. Jakobson's (1987) view of reference and the difference between general and contextual meaning shows not only the framework in which these ideas are conceived but more importantly where they lead.

Jakobson's (1987) dichotomy between general and contextual meaning was a truly revolutionary understanding of the structure of meaning in language. He developed a 'transcendental philosophy' of language (Holenstein, 1976: 67), one in which meaning cannot be conceived as a separate entity mapped onto different formal structures in different languages, but which must be viewed as inherent in the formal structures themselves. This in turn provides an entirely new conceptualization of invasiveness in language, whereby it is the invariant meaning of a form which generates its contextual meaning in response to specific situational events. The essential point is that meaning is a self-generating phenomenon, inherent in a language; it enables individuals to operate about their environment but does not depend upon particular features of the environment for its determination. Jakobson (1987) propounds a view in which context is substantial to perceive something. He talks of a closed universe of signs which represents the 'inevitable enclosure of the world in our consciousness', as propounded by transcendental philosophy.

Bakhtin (1981) considered literature to be nothing more than a subfield of the all-encompassing realm of ideology. He does not see verbal art as distinct from other branches of human enterprise, because of the intersection of literature with other offshoots of ideology. Bakhtin (1981) does not accord an

autonomous status to literature. According to him, every individual phenomenon is a sign which stands for another reality. Hence, a sign itself works in an ideological sphere, where it is the result of an all-encompassing thick net of interconnecting political, religious, and literary contests. Dolezel Lubomir (2008) writes in "Structuralism of the Prague School" (Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: 38) that Bakhtin's (1981) accordance of literature with semiotic terminology goes following Jakobson's (1987) coinage of the term 'Structuralism' ⁱ. According to Jakobson's (1987) poetical inquiries, a poem, like a musical composition, affects the ordinary reader with the possibility of artistic perception but produces neither the need nor the competence to affect a scientific analysis. This is because a poem, like a musical composition, "affords the ordinary reader the possibility of an artistic perception." (116). Jakobson (1987) was also aware that a person concerned with human communication cannot segregate sounds and signals from semantic and cultural phenomena and his epistemic position is ever-changing and shifting.

In addition to this, the Prague School proposed an all-encompassing theory of literature that made use of the tools offered by semiotics. According to Jakobson (1987), language and literature are specialized forms of expression that exist within the overarching framework of the human cultural system. As a result of this, he claims that an aesthetic phenomenon makes man conscious of the many-sidedness and diversity of reality. He widens the aspects of communication to six elements, which he refers to as the addresser, addressee, message, context, contact, and code. As a result, he differentiates between six functions of language, which he calls emotive, conative, poetic, referential, and phatic. He gives the following definition of poetic function: oriented towards the message as such concentrates on the message for its own sake.ⁱⁱ

Jakobson (1987) writes that inter-subjective factors are necessarily present in literary communication because the literary work serves as an intermediary between its author and collectivity. Jakobson (1987) is a proponent of the phenomenological theory of literature. The creative process is constrained by literary traditions in terms of the subjects, genres, and styles of literary artefacts. In addition to this, they control which components of the topic may participate in the creative process and which cannot. He hypothesizes that certain eras placed a significant amount of emphasis on direct sense experience, whilst other eras placed a greater focus on memory, which he defines as the stock of perception. The creative subject exists in a relational dialectic with intersubjective conventions, always contesting the legitimacy of those norms through their volitions. It is up to the person who is creating the aesthetic object to ensure that it is one of a kind. This must be done following a global constructional principle that functions in every segment of the work, even the most minute, and that produces a unified and unifying systematization of all the constituents. The poet is the one who should be held accountable for the semantic coherence of the literary artefact. When we consider Jakobson's (1987) contribution to the theory of the activity of the receiving subject, we discover that he offered a comprehensive phenomenological account of the cognitive process. He recognizes that the mental states of several receivers of the same literary work are not similar to one another, even if they all experienced the same work. Phenomenological Structuralism by Jakobson, on the other hand, shifts the focus of the theory of reception by recognizing that literary study cannot investigate the mental state of each recipient, but rather the conditions of the induction of this state, conditions which are given equally for all receiving individuals and are objectively identifiable in the structure of the work.

Jakobson's theory recognizes that literary study cannot investigate the mental state of each recipient because it recognizes that literary study cannot investigate he believes that the inter-subjective states of mind of receivers will always share something in common, and as a result, it is not impossible to conduct an evaluation that is generally valid of a literary artefact. Hence, rather than suppressing the role of the 'subject' (creator as well as receiver) Jakobson's phenomenological understanding finds a balance between supra-individual factors' in literary communication. Jakobson also diverged from Saussurian linguistics by positing that the relation between language as a system and language as a set of modifications cannot be suppressed.

In his explanation of the literary product as well as the process of creation and reception Bakhtin (1981) relied on Neo-Kantianism. M.A.R Habib posits that Bakhtin provides a resolution to the crises in theory left by Formalists. In his essays 'Art and Responsibility' and 'Author and Hero' Bakhtin subscribes to neo-Kantianism by offering phenomenological vindication of the 'inter-subjective' link of human selves in language. Bakhtin suggests that the human subject is best understood in terms of the connections it has with other subjects and how those connections are made explicit in the production of language. Bakhtin's philosophy of language, emphasises how human consciousness functions in terms of its relations to something or some other consciousness exterior to it and relies more heavily upon the data of knowledge as they are experienced.

Put in simple words, Bakhtin begins his investigation with an explanation of how human understanding is possible at all and suggests that language is the vehicle for bridging the gap between I-for-myself and the I-for-the-other. In building a model of human understanding on dialogue (rather than on monologue or soliloquy) language becomes

the material by which humans construct subject-position. Bakhtin, on the other hand, wanted to develop a philosophy of language that would offer methods in which the speech would not be severed from the linguistic aesthetic object. This was one of his goals. In a way, he was beginning to create a materialist theory of social production, and this is the point at which he leans towards a materialistic notion of aesthetics. He proposed that the subject's material conditions had a great deal to do with one's perception of any utterance. On the other hand, he proposed a method through which the aesthetically pleasing aspects of such an item might be investigated in connection with the human capacity for cognition. So, by integrating a theory of cognition into the general theory of aesthetics, we can provide a 'phenomenological solution to the crises'.

Bakhtin's explanation of an individual's phenomenological linguistic experience known as 'dialogism' is persistently present throughout his work. Traditionally, dialogism is considered a bridge between 'oneself and other multiple selves'. In short, it is a bridge between the notions of "I- for myself" and "I-as-the-other" (the perception of others about me, yet interiorized by me). Bakhtin's 'Dialogue' does not involve an exchange of meaning between two people. On the contrary, there occurs an exchange of selves in a person's linguistic experience in his philosophy, since language is the medium with which subjects conceive of their world and their placement in it. The term Dialogism also alludes to the non-coincidence of the sign-as-interiorized and the sign-as-uttered: the minute a sign is uttered in a specific context, both the sign and the context are interiorized, which results in the production of a new context for subsequent application. In addition to this, the selves that take part in such an exchange are also rebuilt since the language that they use has evolved.

Since all humans have the capacity for aesthetically 'consummating' a given moment

(or stimuli) over and above coming to cognitive-ethical consciousness of that moment, as well as the capacity for uttering language in response to that event, one may say that dialogism is the means through which humans come into contact with one another and embark on a romantic or sexual connection with one another. The cognitive-ethical event that occurs as a direct result of this culmination is called dialogue.

Bakhtin acknowledges Formalism's effort to concretize the link between a literary text and literary scholarship, but he was also conscious of the loopholes in Formalism. He believed that Formalism, in its positioning against idealism has a separation of meaning from the material, which overlooked ideological meaning in the text, disconnecting the object from the sources of its meanings and individual consumption as a result. He believed that it was unavoidable to bring the wealth and depth of ideological meaning, to the forefront of inquiry. Bakhtin is quoted as saying; to divorce the literary object from its essential links with other things would be to render it incomprehensible. He provides evidence that literary works are examples of ideological construction: literary works are a part of the practical reality that surrounds humans because of their linguistic construction, and language is an essential component of the ideological material that surrounds and creates humans. He substantiates this claim by arguing that literary works are examples of ideological construction.

Bakhtin was interested in how language in general, and aesthetic language in particular, could be studied by examining how social interaction was determined by the material (including language) out of which that interaction was constructed. Specifically, Bakhtin was concerned with how aesthetic language could be studied. He emphasizes how aesthetic activity, both within the realm of art and outside of it, is the act of human cognition, which is the crux of the study of

general aesthetics that Formalists ignore. This is because Formalists believe that aesthetic activity can only occur within the realm of art. According to Bakhtin, human artistic activity may be broken down into three categories. In 'Art and Responsibility' he says that cognition is the first aspect of human aesthetic activity. Cognition is the act of finding reality and 'it is the faculty of the human mind to organize objects regardless of their 'axiological relations to the humans'. It is the knowledge that is strictly arranged according to scientific principles and, like the Husserlian definition of cognition, it refers to ideas that are shared by all human minds. The second facet of activity is ethics, which refers to the many courses of action that a person is capable of taking in response to the cognitive comprehension of a certain occurrence or thing.

The third and last component is the aesthetic, which brings together ethical behaviour and cognitive knowledge. Through the manipulation of the identified and judged world, aesthetic action gives concrete form to the concept of 'cognitive-ethical unity'. In a nutshell, the completion of an object's cognitive and ethical features is brought about by aesthetic consumption, which does this by bringing these elements into contact with the particular human subject, also known as the active consciousnesses.

His allegiance to the neo-Kantian school of philosophy is the source of Bakhtin's interest in phenomenology, or more precisely, how the human mind comes to awareness in interaction with things or other human subjects. More directly, Bakhtin's seminal concept of 'dialogism' has been influenced by Hermann Cohn's thinking. It characterizes not only a phenomenology of aesthetic contemplation for Bakhtin but more broadly characterises all of human activity. Bakhtin influenced by Cohn believed that objects or beings in the world played a part in the phenomenology of the mind. He grounds his ideas on human subjective relations and how they are consummated through language. He

believed that humans are poised in time and space differently from one another and they see different things, so everyone understands one's situation differently, by dint of their discrete locations. It is in the correlation between the human capacity to 'author' signs to consummate objects of knowledge and the author's function in consummating the hero in aesthetic works, that we can begin to discuss the phenomenology of everyday life that Bakhtin constructs in 'Author and Hero'. The world of cognition and every constituent in it is capable of being thought, but they are not capable of actually being perceived.

Bakhtin sought not only to theorize a phenomenology of the mind in which the poetic whole was brought to the forefront by putting it in a subject's consciousness but to construct a broad phenomenological theory on which to base an aesthetic theory that understands durably valid cultural products. Bakhtin makes it plain that aesthetic understanding or consummation is only possible in a relationship between self and other: "An aesthetic event can take place only when there are two participants present, it presupposes two non-coinciding consciousnesses in which one consciousness "delimits' or completes the other from the outside. Most explicitly with relation to aesthetic activity, the author does not coincide with the hero, even in autobiography, since they are on different planes' the author, a real person is bestowing upon the hero- who may have characteristics much like the author himself- a completed personality, yet the hero is not the author for the obvious reason that the hero is a fictional character and does not exist independent of the author. More to the point, even if the author gives the hero traits that mirror nearly exactly traits that exist in the author, the hero is 'consummated' in the language of the text, and once the author finishes writing the life of the hero, the author's life continues: the "I" of the aesthetic construct and the "I" of the author are markedly different. The first is the:

- for—myself the consummated whole, the second is the “I-for- the other- the yet-to-be-completed, cognitive-ethical life.

In terms of lived relations, however, human subjects are non-coincident because they occupy different times and spaces from one another. As a result of this non-coincidence, each person's orientation to his or her surroundings and his or her capacity for response will also be non-coincident. There exists that ‘excess of seeing’ that results in a difference in the ‘expressed horizon’ of each subject.

Bakhtin propounds that the phenomenological experience of individuals tends to be different from each other because of their distinct interiorized ideological fabric. To put it simply our perception of others and ourselves has been constituted by a multiplex of cognitive operations’ of other people performed on us through various stages of our lives. Our conscious experience of ourselves comes from external forces comprising the actions of others and linguistic expressions of all those people surrounding us. To perceive the object, the subject must use the language at one's disposal. According to Bakhtin interiorized language also operates in a similar mode. Because our orientation in time and space are different, we can ‘see’ things to which the other does not have access; because of our different language backgrounds, since we have interiorized different ideological material), our language will also be different, even though we may speak the same ‘national language’ or come from similar material situations.

Conclusion

To conclude the discussion we can say that the heritage in literary and linguistic studies left by Jakobson and Bakhtin is rich as they endowed Formalism with phenomenological explanations for meaning-making processes. They enhanced it by devising basic rules that could be used in a variety of contexts, which were taken from the intersections of phenomenology and linguistics. A model that

was used by anthropologists to announce that structural linguistics is the most highly developed of the social sciences and is destined to play a renovating role throughout those disciplines was Jakobson's theory of binary distinctive features. This model was derived from Jakobson's theory of binary distinctive features. His investigation into the fundamental nature of literary language was an original and important contribution. Bakhtin made a unique contribution by putting a focus on the inherent qualities of aesthetic objects, the particular role of language, and the extrinsic link of literature to the people who consume it and make it.

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ⁱ Roman Jakobson coined the term 'Structuralism' in 1929 in a Czech paper where he stated, "Were we to summarize the leading idea of present day science in its most various manifestations, we could hardly find a more appropriate designation than Structuralism. Any set of phenomenon examined by contemporary science is treated not as a mechanical agglomeration but as a

Steiner, P. (2008). "Russian Formalism" in *the Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Vol. 8. Ed. Raman Selden, pp. 11-33. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

structural whole, and the basic task is to reveal the inner, whether static or developmental laws of this system." (*The Cambridge History of literary Criticism*)

ⁱⁱ This shift from 'sign to the message is indicative of the post war conception of literature as text rather than as language.