

THE POWER OF LITERATURE: CAN THE DEAD SPEAK?

Bootheina Majoul¹
ISLT-University of Carthage, Tunisia
bootheinamajoul@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the beginning of recorded history, literature has been the finest means of human expression. Its tool is the language through which it creates alternative universes representing facts or fiction. Whether imagined or real, narratives have the power to voice silence, unveil verity and become thus receptacles of an ever present past. Indeed, Literature empowers; it acts as memory preserved within closed pages, forgotten then remembered every time a book is read. It survives time and revives reminiscences; it is “a record of human consciousness” (Lodge 10). It is a safe space for writers, a shelter, and a secret keeper; but also, a counter space and alternative one for readers since it delivers lessons from the past that migrate and offer possibilities. The “dead” text, the corpse of the narrative (as well as corpse narratives) provides post death truths that survive us, for the next generation, for history, and the archive. That inanimate object helps people understand the world. Literature is power otherwise. Employing language, literature gives voice to the voiceless, the marginalised and the oppressed. Literary dissent is the most peaceful way to exert power and make views, pain, and (in)justice heard. This paper will dig into the power of Literature to change history through stories; it will examine selected texts and different literary genres to highlight the plight of words, and narratives’ transformative nature/power.

Keywords: Dissidence; empowerment; history from below; Literature; power

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¹ Corresponding Author : Bootheina Majoul ORCID ID : <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0144-3450>

1. Introduction

This paper will dig into the power of Literature to change history through stories; it will examine selected texts and different literary genres to highlight the plight of words, and narratives' transformative nature/power. The main focus will be on works by Doris Lessing, Salman Rushdie, Taoufik Ben Brik, and Mahmoud Darwich. These selected examples from World Literature will be resorted to as a fertile ground to highlight the transformative and subversive power of words. This article aims to shed light on the political dimension of dead/silent texts that have the capacity to speak louder than actions.

2. On Literature

...the real world was full of magic, so magical worlds could easily be real.

— Salman Rushdie

L'un des rôles du roman, c'est de réinventer le monde, et notre monde d'aujourd'hui a drôlement besoin d'être réinventé. — Amin Maalouf

Since the beginning of recorded history, literature is the finest means of human expression. Its tool is the language through which it creates alternative universes representing facts or fiction. Whether imagined or real, narratives have the power to voice silence, unveil verity, and become thus receptacles of an ever present past. In *The Uses of Literature* Italo Calvino explains: "Literature is one of a society's instruments of self-awareness—certainly not the only one, but nonetheless an essential instrument, because its origins are connected with the origins of various types of knowledge, various codes, various forms of critical thought" (1982, p 69). Indeed, Literature empowers; it acts as memory preserved within closed pages, forgotten then remembered every time a book is read. It survives time and revives reminiscences; it acts as "a record of human consciousness" (Lodge 2002, p 10). It is a safe space for writers, a shelter, a secret keeper; but also, a counter space and alternative one for readers since it delivers lessons from the past that migrate and offer possibilities.

2.1. Literature is (Not) for Homo Sapiens (?)

Dans notre monde, il n'y aura pas d'autres émotions que la crainte, la rage et l'humiliation. Il n'y aura ni art, ni littérature. Il n'y aura ni curiosité ni joie de vivre. — George Orwell

...all books contain the amalgamation of a certain number of age-old truths.
— Derrida

Literature is written by/for homo (human being) sapiens (intelligent and reasonable). It narrates their stories and allows them access to a space of speech; it is a stage of self-expression. Literature is matrix of thought, ideas, feelings, etc. that provides agency to those who have a message to share with the world.

In May 2022, during a thought-provoking academic event organized by the Università degli studi de Torino, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh gave a lecture entitled "Can the non-human speak?". He did not refer to nature or animals, though he insisted on the fact that the world is a garden and man should cultivate his garden, referring to Voltaire's *Candide*. Ghosh aimed to point at an important question "Can all humans speak?" that leads to an unquestionable negative answer. Indeed, the act of speech is also intimately related and subjected to silence. In that sense, there are different categories of humans (and the list is much longer than the provided examples): those who fail to express themselves (out of fear or shame), those who choose silence (because they are/became oblivious), those who are not interested in the interaction (since they are indifferent and egocentric), those who express

themselves but no one listens (deafness is exerted over them as a means of subjugation), those who cannot express themselves (because they are silenced, yet dehumanized), and those who address a specific audience and not others (they advocate a process of selection, isolationism and elimination). There are also those who speak for others; they are divided into two distinct categories: those who make silenced voices heard (they speak for them), and those who eliminate others, falsify history, and craft their own version of a story to serve their own interests. Finally, there are people who say nothing (their silence is ethical) simply because, as Rushdie's narrator puts it in *Shame*: “there are things that cannot be said. No, it's more than that: there are things that cannot be permitted to be true” (1995, p 82). In this case, silence is louder than words; it expresses refusal and even impedes words from taking any form.

In fact, speech acts and acts of speech have the power to (de)humanize us. Words could liberate us as much as they might be “prisons we choose to live inside” (Lessing 1987). They also could incarnate helpless screams for justice and truth, but “the wind blows away our words” (Lessing 1987) whenever words fail to reach the right ear. Sometimes they are unheard simply because the receiver is practicing deafness to subjugate and silence a text, speaker, or words of justice. Unfortunately, due to that not all Homo Sapiens speak.

2.2. *The Death of Literature*

In other words, the task of man is one: to fashion a world by giving it a meaning.

— Simone de Beauvoir

Literature and Death do share one important characteristic: they give meaning to Life, to our very existence. But the big question comes from Rushdie's protagonist in *Haroun & the Sea of Stories*: “what's the use of stories that aren't even true?” (1990, p 22). The “dead” text, the corpse of the narrative (as well as corpse narratives) provides post death truths that survive us; they represent a wealthy heritage for the next generation, for history, for the archive. That inanimate object helps people understand the world (Rushdie, *Languages of Truth*, 2021, p 7).

Homo Sapiens need literature to have a say and survive. Aware of their finitude, stored stories represent promises of eternity. Literature reminds us of our finitude but at the same time it is “a slap on the face of death” as the scholar Adriana Teodorescu puts it in her book *Death Representations in Literature* (2015, p 2). In fact, it acts as memory, a constant reminder, an ever-present absence/trace (to rely on Derrida's notion of the trace), a warner, teacher, a prophet, etc.

3. Counter Narratives as Power Otherwise

La littérature est le contraire de la sagesse : un langage assagi est un langage déclinant, servile. — Yannick Haenel

From a different perspective, unspoken the word leads to subjugation. In that context The Thief of Literature in Taoufik Ben Brik's *The Hamlet Brothers* utters a satiric poem by the Tunisian revolutionary poet Sghaier Awled Hmed in an attempt to criticize the oblivion and frailty of Tunisian people in general and particularly intellectuals, who stare at the state of chaos in which they live and do not react:

سعداء بما نحن فيه/ سعداء بحكامنا يرجعون الكلام إلى الحلق/ كي نختنق/ سعداء
بقرن يجيء/ وآخر يمضي/ وها أن ثورًا بقرنين/ يبقرننا في الغسق
(الإخوة هملت, 70)

[We are so happy with what we go through / we are so glad with our rulers;
they return words to the throat / so that we suffocate/ Happy with a century
that comes / and another that ends / And here's a bull with two horns /
beating us at dusk] (*The Hamlet Brothers*, 2016, p 70)

Ben Brik is like a puppeteer; he makes his imagined protagonist steal the poet's words to shake and shock his readers. He does not only aim to blame corrupt politicians here and there but also wanted to point fingers of blame towards those intellectuals who instead of fighting for the freedom of expression, use their pens to praise their unscrupulous amoral oppressors. The Thief of Literature warns:

الويل للناقد في أمة لم يألف أديباؤها إلا قرابين المدح وندور الثناء
(الإخوة همّلت، 78)

[Woe to the critic in a nation whose writers are only familiar with praise offerings and vows of praise] (*The Hamlet Brothers*, 2016, p 78)

Taoufik Ben Brik is just like Salman Rushdie, his pen is poisonous and his works are political. Both writers aim at offending their readers as well as those they attack in their narratives. Their stories destabilize through satire and parody. Both authors were targeted, just like all those who attempted to unveil hidden truths or give voice to their ideas and ideologies. This confirms that their narratives are powerful and represent a threat to corrupt hegemonic forces.

There were incessant attempts to “assassinate” literature and silence its eternal messages. Indeed, there a long history of burning books (Ibn Rushd), prohibited texts (Rushdie) here and there, rejected publications (Lessing's Jane Somers' novels), assassinated writers (Nadia Anjurman in Afghanistan, Taher Djaout in Algeria, etc.), closed departments of Literature and humanities in several places in the world, etc. Such practices are nothing but confirmed forms of cultural genocide leading to cultural precarity and decay. This attempt at declaring the death of literature (as a creative act or as discipline) confirms the power of its ideological impact, and its capacity in changing destinies. So, “it wasn't *only a story*, after all” asserts Haroun (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990, p 50).

4. Literature as History from Below

The purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink.

— T.S. Eliot

Literature is history from below; it stores stories and becomes the depository of a different version of the past from the perspective of the narrator, defying thus the frame and (mis)representations imposed by hegemonic forces. It listens to traumas and inspires to action. As it also has the vigor to warn about the future. Barthes asserts: “Astrology and Literature have the same task, the ‘delayed’ confirmation of the real” (2009, p 116). For thus, a writer bears the heavy burden of the responsibility to provide readers with an adjusted version of history; as Camus puts it:

“le rôle de l'écrivain, du même coup, ne se sépare pas de devoirs difficiles.
Par définition, il ne peut se mettre aujourd'hui au service de ceux qui font
l'histoire : il est au service de ceux qui la subissent” (1958, p15).

[The writer's function is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it]

He insists on the difficult mission of the intellectual to defy the imposed narrative and provide an alternative space of verity and justice for those who were subjugated, oppressed and silenced. Chomsky is also convinced about the important role of the elite, as he states in an article entitled "A Special Supplement: The Responsibility of Intellectuals" published at *The New York Review of Books*: "Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions" (1967, para. 2).

5. The Politics of Literature

I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word.

— Emily Dickinson

Literature is power otherwise. By means of language it gives voice to the voiceless, the marginalize and the oppressed. Literary dissent is the most peaceful way to exert power and make views, pain, and (in)justice heard. Literature is incontrovertibly political: through the art of rhetoric, it convinces and twists minds, and by means of metaphors, it reshapes wor(l)ds. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie asserts: "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory" (1992, p 14).

In his almost all his texts, Rushdie just like Pope's resorts to satire. Both writers use myths and their works as extended metaphors of literal truths. They are arrogant satirists proud of their skilfulness with words and scatological glee. Pope proudly declares: "Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see/ Men not afraid of God, afraid of me" (qtd. in Knight, 2004, p 41), and Rushdie boasts the fact that all the politicians he attacked in his works died -whether naturally or assassinated. This recalls, Archilochus who once took pride in claiming that his satire was so witty and powerful that it led to the death of two people. By means of mere words, these writers, now and then, succeeded in making their harsh criticism heard and allowed their texts to become powerful tools of change and eternal receptacles of their dissidence. Jean Paul Sartre asserts: "modern literature is a cancer of words" (1965, p 278); it is indeed dangerous, memorable and unstoppable, it travels, reaches all ears and remains forever.

Roland Barthes considers literature as an institution by itself (1967, p 37). In *Writing Degree Zero*, he uses Descartes's expression *Larvatus prodeo* [I wear a mask] to describe literature; he claims: "The whole of Literature can declare *Larvatus prodeo*" (1967, p 40). Indeed, hidden behind the mask of fiction and imagination, the text allows the writer the freedom to declare a war of words and yet to historicize without being put into trouble, blamed or attacked. In reality, literature is meant to destabilize us, make us think, and push us to reframe and understand world dynamics. As Derrida puts it: "The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything...to say everything is also to break out of [franchir] prohibitions. To affranchise oneself [s'affranchir]-in every field where law can lay down the law...It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution" (*Acts of Literature*, 1992, p 36). He claims literature to embody an institution per se and to create a free space in which the writer, the reader, and the protagonist are free from the barricades of the outside world. For Derrida, "The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon" (*Acts of Literature*, 1992, p 38).

Literature has also the capacity to adjust the narrative and subvert imposed dangerous discourses. It has the power to dismantle extremist ideologies and fundamentalism. It can do that without forcing or trying to convince; the text gently stands there, and it is the decision to read it that leads to the big shift towards thinking. The writer Tabish Khair asserts: “Literature does not provide alternative answers. Literature teaches a certain process of reading, which enables a certain mode of thinking and contemplation. It is this that is the necessary defense of literature” (2017, p xi). Both the ethics and aesthetics of the text serve the purpose of conveying new messages that challenge the reader and make him cogitate about the surrounding world, and question any preconceived received ideas.

The Indian writer Mahasweta Devi thinks that when she writes, she must bear in mind that she has “a sense of duty”. She considers literature as portraying and representing a kind of “social conscience” (*Imaginary Maps*, 1995, p xvi). It acts as a moralizer or values-bearer; so, its power is beyond words and above the pleasure of the moment of writing or reading a tale. In fact, Literature has thus the power to change history through stories. According to Derrida, its fictionality, or what he calls in *Acts of Literature* “irresponsibility”, gives the text its legitimacy; and while attributing the freedom of expression to its producer, it also puts the heavy burden of responsibility on the shoulders of its beholder:

This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise. (1992, p 38)

According to him, the plight of words embodies the promise of a delayed democracy, that is to come *à-venir* in the future *avenir*. And though Rushdie’s protagonist in *Shalimar the Clown* is very pessimistic about the possibility and power of inspiration of stories as he claims: “Stories were stories and real life was real life, naked, ugly, and finally impossible to cosmeticize in the greasepaint of a tale” (2005, p 204), a reader should trust Derridian claims and believe that word drops can make an ocean.

6. The Power/Prowess of Words

Literature and history, these two great branches of human learning, records of human behavior, human thought...from them one may learn how to be a citizen and a human being.

— Doris Lessing

L'oiseau crie ou chante ; et la voix semble être à l'oiseau d'une valeur assez différente de la valeur qu'elle a chez les autres bêtes criantes ou hurlantes.

— Paul Valéry

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the Water Genie Iff asserts: “Anybody can tell stories” (1990, p 58). But he then explained to Haroun: “Liars, and cheats, and crooks, for example. But for stories with that Extra Ingredient, ah, for those, even the best storytellers need the Story Waters. Storytelling needs fuel, just like a car; and if you don’t have the Water, you just run out of Steam” (1990, p 58). The secret ingredient Rushdie points at through Iff is the genuineness of the storyteller, or whom Foucault refers to as “the *parrhesiastes* ... the one who uses parrhesia., i.e., the one who speaks the truth” (2001, p 11).

Indeed, Foucault thinks that the ones who dare to say everything, like writers, are necessary to create a certain balance in society and to speak out the truth and to criticize those who detain power. Their criticism preserves healthy power dynamics. Foucault asserts: “For power without limitation is directly related to madness. The man who exercises power is wise only insofar as there exists someone who can use parrhesia to criticize him, thereby putting some limit to his power, to his command” (2001, p 29). According to him, *parrhesiastes* provide a counter discourse that has to power to control hegemonic forces, by means of language.

Thus, the dead text has prowess and power to stand against the status quo and stop the “madness” of the “the man who exercises power”. Barthes asserts that when the message is clear, “the meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decision” (2009, pp 140-141). Thus, by means of words, Literature bridges the world and creates safe pathways; it opens doors that were once closed by ideology, and paves the way for a cross-cultural exchange to occur. Language in this sense, announces, denounces, and liberates.

7. Silence of the Dead

In *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*, the Turkish writer Elif Shafak insists on the very role of writing literature to render visible what (in)visible hegemonic forces subjugates for their own interests; she claims:

Still today, as a novelist, I am not only drawn to stories but also to silences. My first instinct as a storyteller is to dig into ‘the periphery’ rather than ‘the centre’ and focus my attention on the marginalised, underserved, disenfranchised and censored voices. Taboos too, including political, cultural, gender taboos. There is a part of me that wants to understand, at any moment in time, where in a society the silent letters are hidden. (2020, p 14)

By means of silent letters, a text relies on the plight of words and their strong transformative nature/power. Indeed, some texts/words have the capacity to transfigure destinies.

In *The Roar of Silence* Mahmoud Darwish makes makes the silent words speak for the oppressed:

I listen to the silence. Is there such a thing as silence? If
we were to forget its name and listen intently to what is in it,
we would hear the sound of the winds roaming in space and the cries
that have found their way back to the earliest caves.

Silence is a sound which has evaporated and disappeared in the wind and
fragmented into echoes preserved in cosmic water jars. If we were to listen
intently, we would hear the thud of the apple against a stone in God's garden,
Abel's cry of fear when he first sees his own blood,

the original moans of desire between a man and a woman who don't know
what they are doing. We would hear Jonah's meditations in the belly of the
whale and the secret negotiations between the ancients gods. If we were to
listen intently to what is behind the veil of silence,

we would hear nocturnal conversations between the prophets and their
wives, the rhythms of the earliest poetry, sybarites complaining of boredom,

horses' hooves in a war in an unspecified time and place, the music accompanying the sacred ritual of debauchery, Gilgamesh's tears over his friend Enkidu, the monkey's bewilderment as he jumps from out the trees to occupy the throne of the tribe, Sarah and Hagar exchanging insults.

If we were to listen intently to the sound of silence

we would talk less.

The *parrhesiaste* Darwich invites us to stop our bravado and listen to “the sound of silence”. His poem is an invitation to reexamine the history of humanity, a voice coming from religious texts, stories and messages, may we learn from past mistakes. Zizek insists on the condescending Hegelian’s claim about the impossibility of learning from the past: “Hegel wrote that the only thing we can learn from history is that we learn nothing from history” (2020, p 11). Same for words, and literature; they are “dead”, silent. And yet, there, somewhere, everywhere, De Beauvoir evokes the power of the silent invisible God “the universal is silence. He demands nothing; he promises nothing; he requires no sacrifice; he dispenses no punishment or reward; he can justify nothing, nor condemn anything” (*What is Existentialism?* 2020, p 35) but still in front of Him, the visible Man is nothing.

The Thief of Literature in Taoufik Ben Brik’s *The Hamlet Brothers* boasts the power of words and their sacred meaning; he blames silence and emphasizes the survival of words and their prophetic messages:

جلال الكلمة. الحياة فانية. الكلمة وحدها باقية. بها خلق الإنسان الإله وإليها أرجعه.
فتجعل الكلمة الله. التوراة والإنجيل. القرآن كلام الله. موسى كليم الله. وأي رسول لم يتكلم
على لسانه إله. إنما الصمت العدم والكفر بالله.

(الإخوة هممت، 40)

[Glory of the word. Life is ephemeral. Only the word remains. Through it, man created God and to Him returned it back. Then the word makes God. The Torah and the Bible. The Qur'an is the word of God. Moses spoke to God. And which prophet did not speak on his tongue a God. Silence incarnates nothingness and disbelief in God] (*The Hamlet Brothers*, 2016, p 40)

Nietzsche excuses Man claiming: “Human, All Too Human”, and Rushdie confirms: “We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992, p 12). So, let the silent dead text speak, and the living creatures listen to the first holy message sent to humanity “*Ikraa*” [read]. Silence is made of gold, some say. May the silent text make the noise and continue propagating living knowledge.

8. Conclusion

This article highlighted the power of narratives in shocking and shaking the readers and enhancing their critical thinking to understand power dynamics and question them. It pointed at the crucial function of counter-narratives in adjusting the frame for hegemonic forces. By providing examples from contemporary literature, this paper showed the power of words and the capacity of stories to inspire and instigate for change both at the political and social levels.

The aim of such approach was to underline the magnitude of what seems to be silent or dead, an extended metaphor for words on paper or in closed books, to subvert power, make history, and change destinies.

Prayers for all the dead, being it a text, word, his/her story, marginalized, oppressed, subjugated, forgotten, or Martyr.

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