

The language of ‘unsayable’ in Jon Fosse’s *Aliss at the Fire*.

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Abstract

Jon Fosse's *Aliss at the Fire* is a Norwegian portrayal of a couple and the memories which continue to address and encounter them. With a vivid hallucinatory prose, the novella is an insight to the repressed psychological consciousness of the characters. It is narrated in a way which allows access to characters' past and the string of self which binds them to nothingness. This paper explores the idea of ‘unsayable’, a term used by the Nobel prize committee for Jon Fosse writings, in *Aliss at the Fire*. The paper argues that the subconscious voices of novella's characters is a representation of the past that encounters in the present and is portrayed by the complex narrative structure as constructed and navigated by Fosse. The paper explores the symbols, narrative structure and the gender dynamics in the novella and ultimately justify the ‘unsayable’ as a trope of linguistic anxiety, which is not comprehensible and cannot be communicated in clear expression by the characters.

1. Introduction

“I’m not thinking about anything.” - Asle (12)

Jon Fosse *Aliss at the Fire* (2004), a 74 pages novella, delves deeper into the human consciousness to find reasons and voice to explain one's action. The female protagonist, Signe, sitting on a bench in March 2002, sees a vision of her past twenty years earlier. Her

husband “disappeared” one day in late November 1979 and never returned. Fosse's remarkable portrayal of unheard and unaware voices is present throughout the novella, without much action. The remarkable depiction of voices which are ‘unsayable’ is portrayed through the complex structure of the novella. Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen and Irish writer Samuel Beckett are well known to portray the hollowness, uncertainty and nothingness of human lives through remarkable plays. Fosse is equated by his contemporaries with Ibsen and

Beckett for writing plays and prose which are repetitive, complex and give strength to the inner voice. *Aliss at the Fire* is much like this and the major dynamics it encounters is the anxiety of one self.

Language is a medium of communication, through which ideas, emotions, thoughts and verbal self is expressed. Yet the language can sometimes be insufficient to express and communicate even the basic feelings and emotions. This situation of not being able to express oneself through the use of language is termed unsayable. Unsayable has multiple connotations. It could be related to past trauma, childhood experiences, love, anxiety, nervousness, fear and incomprehensible dreams; all such events can interfere with a person's expression of language, resulting in lack of words to express the situation. This lack of expression when coincides with terrible past memory results in inability of expression, a situation of unsayable. Unsayable is a negative language as Standford Budick and Wolfgang Iser¹ argues, the language which is excluded from the mainstream language.

2.Symbols

Fosse expresses the 'unsayable' by bringing symbols, representing memory but simultaneously a quest for rehabilitation and recognition. The novella is enriched with symbols. Darkness, Boat, Fjord, Fire, Old house, are symbols which are present throughout and represent individual voices and memories. Everything is dark and the darkness merges with Asle, the protagonist's "dark hair" and Aliss's "long dark hair". The sky, the fjord,

Asle's sweater and the memory, everything is dark. The dark is the only light accessible to the characters. Signe and Asle, the "happy" couple, navigate through darkness in order to understand the meaning of their relationship and their actions. Fosse uses the symbol of darkness carefully, aware of the fact that the "fire" should be completely visible in the background of the text; however, the darkness dominates the text. That is the reason Asle, Signe, Kristoffer and Asle's "yellow-white" cap grandmother keeps on putting wooden logs into the stoves, in order to warm the house but simultaneously light their lives with the darkness of the outside.

Boat, metaphorically a symbol of the past in the text, is something which binds our protagonist, Asle, with his past, which he is unaware of, about the dead Asle, his grandfather's brother. Boat is the way through which all male characters are charged up. Asle was gifted the boat specially built for him by Johannes, the old boatbuilder. We readers are aware of the fact that Asle's disappearance is a way to communicate with the unknown past or a guilt for something which we are never told. Asle disappearance is a gradual process, which is a consequence of his inability to express his feelings and the continuous haunting of the past. To Signe, the boat is a "toothpick and it's dangerous" but for Asle, the boat has a deep meaning and holds a trope to identify himself. Signe is aware that the boat has killed many people. Kristoffer was on the verge of being drowned, Asle (the old one) drowned and Asle, the protagonist, will finally "disappear". The boat is both a threat and an escape from the present, a trope which binds past to the present.

The Fire, a symbol which has reference in the novella's title is the fire to enlighten characters'

¹ *Language of the Unsayable: The play of negativity in Literature and Literary theory (1996).*

past. The Fire is the ultimate resolution. It has different meanings for every character: to Signe, it allows her to see in the darkness from the “old house” window; to Aliss for she can roast sheep heads; to Asle a hope to come back home and to Asle's grandmother a warmth of belongingness. Fire is Fosse's strategy to enlighten and allow characters to get peek into the lightness. It is through Fire that the darkness and the lightness merges, without any distinction.

Other minor symbols are scattered in the story. The “yellow-white” cap is a symbol representing Asle's grandmother. It connects the past with the present, just like the boat. Further Asle is wearing Signe's black sweater and the yellow white cap whenever it's “cold”, symbolically becoming a figure of memory and attachment. Clothes are functioning as a binding force for our protagonist Asle to connect with the past.

3. Setting of the novel

The text is set in Norwegian background with no access to Norway's picturesque beauty. Readers have only access to the darkness and dullness of Norway's beauty.

“in darkest autumn, when the fjord is grey and black and colourless and it's cold and the waves are high and rough” (14)

Fosse chooses specifically a season of “dark autumn” to show the character's inner voice. In his Nobel Lecture, Fosse agrees that the dark autumn season allows him to write in “loneliness”, which is represented vividly in Aliss at the Fire the setting is very cautious and lonely. The old house is devoid of any living neighbourhood. This very thing impresses Signe

who wanted to live alone with Asle and where “everyone else had left” (10).

The place is surrounded with lively things like fjord, boats, a neighbourhood village (whom we never encounter) and a vast green valley, yet Fosse presents the area in its darkness. It is a clear way to alter the environment along with the character's emotions. Fosse is a playwright and must have immense knowledge about characters' emotions and their surrounding self-relationship, which is dynamic and changes continuously. It is similar to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1949), where the background is a vast desert of land with a single tree, representing the hollowness of human life. In Fosse text, a similar sense of futility of life and repressed anxiety is shown through the setting of “darkness” in the background. It is indeed a Beckettian trope of showing characters' streams of consciousness with repetitive actions. The darkness of the outside corresponds to the darkness in the lives of characters.

4. Narrative Structure

Jon Fosse is appreciated for his vivid hallucinatory prose. In this text, five generations are portrayed in a very simple realistic narrative organisation. While all actions happen through Signe's “she sees” and Asle's “he sees”, the omniscient narrator is present along with Asle, as the first-person narrator. The novella opens with “I see Signe lying there on the bench...” (9), where “I” is the omniscient narrator. The “I” could be Fosse himself. But in between the text, readers encounter another “I” which is Asle himself,

“...Kristopher whose sons were Grandpa Olaf and Asle, the one *I* was named after” (34) (italics mine)

The two narrative voices merge equally in the novella and allow readers to have access to the character's inner voice. The silence is the most heard. The novella is continuous and progresses without a single full stop, which shows the intermixing of voices and memories and it is up to readers to distinguish between the voices.

Le Monde equates Fosse as the Beckett of the twenty-first century. Like Beckett's characters in his play, Fosse characters are more into thinking and not producing action. The characters, Signe and Asle, think but hardly any action takes place. Memory is the only action in this novella. Further it is through narrative voice that readers have access to characters' subconsciousness. They depict the futility of action, which is nothing but no action at all. Like Beckett's characters, Fosse characters are too much into nothingness yet are feeling trapped into something unknown. Signe's reflection of the past is a journey to nothingness yet the past continues to haunt her. She is more susceptible to narrative structure of inactivity, for readers found her "sitting on the bench".

Yet multiple voices can be heard in the narrative progress. Signe represents memory in its present form; Asle represents the subconscious effect of an unresolved memory; Aliss represents the voice of losing and gaining loved ones; Brita is the voice of loss and sufferings but her ultimate "hair clinging tight around her face" (74) is her voice of strong character. The voices which readers have access to is through the inner voice of characters and the minor actions they perform. No character is given a chance to effectively portray their individualism. One should not read this paragraph in equations with Mikhail Bakhtin's

idea of polyphony². While Bakhtin focuses on multiple narrative voices present simultaneously in text, Fosse text is more generalised and abstract in allowing characters to show inner voice and consciousness.

5. Representation of gender dynamics

In *Aliss at the Fire*, all male characters die. Probably this is because of the hidden anxiety they are trapped into. While Old Asle dies due to accidental drowning, the present Asle "disappears", a metaphor to show suicide. The women characters, Signe, Aliss and Brita are present in the domestic space of the old house. While male characters suffer, women characters participate in countering the sufferings. When Kristoffer drowns, Aliss rescues him and when the seven-year-old Asle (the old one) drowns, Brita rescues him, and both women "screams" which surrounds the fjord and the valley. Similarly, when Asle "disappeared", Signe went out in search of him. The male characters are trying to escape from the old house which is haunted by the past memories. The women characters are the one who safeguards the family lineage and strongly survives the past.

Fosse is also very cautious in giving voice to his characters. Both male and female characters voice their opinions. Majority of the time it is the female character who opens the conversation while the Male character only follows the line of conversation:

"There your are, Signe says" (11)

"You good little boy" (Aliss) (34)

² Polyphony is a linguistic style of many voices to describe literary writing that managed to liberate the voice of its characters from under the domination of the authorial or narratorial voice.

“It's good that you're home, Signe says” (40)

“Asle, the woman says” (Brita) (52)

Asle and Signe are physically described in context to their past family members or their ancestors. Signe's “black hairs” and “large eyes” is similar to Aliss, Asle's great-grandfather's mother. Asle's “long black hairs” are similar to Kristoffer's hairs. We can say Asle and Signe represents past figures of the old house and the presence of which “haunts” them. They are similar to their ancestors for the past five generations and this attempt of Fosse to bring past figures in the present, both physically and structurally, makes *Aliss at the Fire* a contemporary Norwegian literary masterpiece. The characters are active in their possession of memories and silence.

Further, the female characters are more bold, active and action oriented. Signe, Aliss and Brita are more confident in dealing with the situation. But on the other hand, Asle the seven-year boy, Kristoffer and Asle, the protagonist is passive. Asle is “shy” and “doesn't want to see people” and “feels sick with embarrassment”. Kristoffer readily accepts that Asle had died without even attempting to save his child or visit a doctor. Fosse is changing the gender dynamics of his time. Women characters in this text outlive male characters. They experience the sense of loss but do not show the traits of anxiety and sufferings. This is the real triumph of Fosse.

6. Conclusion

Aliss at the Fire presents a picture of a family which is in continuous conflict with its past and a haunting exploration of love and loss that delves into the “greatest meditations of

marriage and human fate” (Searls). The ‘unsayable’ is the voice of repressed past and the anxiety of futility of life, an angst which is momentous and will continue for generations in the family and breaking and escaping from the cycle is not feasible. Fosse portrayal of time with a gap of twenty years between the past and the present and the continuous flowing of the narrative without a full stop, is a remarkable achievement in literary studies. With hardly any action, the novella functions on a dynamic scale and a conflict are produced between what is to be said and what is not often the two being contrary. Fosse's repetitive narrative is similar to characters' repetitive actions of clinging to the past, without any motivation to navigate the “(en)lighten” future. *Aliss at the Fire* is a masterpiece in contemporary Norwegian literature, and Fosse's idea of expressing the unsayable is a literary triumph.

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