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THE CONCEPT OF SLENCE AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE IN THE PROSE OF CHINGIZ AITMATOV AND FRANZ KAFKA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Silence, as a deliberate narrative strategy, constitutes one of the most productive yet underexamined devices in twentieth-century world fiction. This comparative study investigates the function of silence in the prose of the Kyrgyz-Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008) and the Czech-German modernist Franz Kafka (1883-1924), two authors whose literary worlds appear geographically and culturally remote yet converge remarkably at the level of narrative technique. Drawing on close textual analysis of Aitmatov's The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (1980) and The White Steamship (1970), alongside Kafka's The Trial (1925), The Castle (1926), and The Metamorphosis (1915), this article identifies three primary functions of silence in both writers: communicative silence (the failure or refusal of language between characters), structural silence (narrative gaps and ellipses that generate meaning through omission), and existential silence (the metaphysical condition of characters confronting an indifferent or incomprehensible world). While Kafka deploys silence as an instrument of bureaucratic terror and ontological alienation rooted in Central European modernism, Aitmatov employs it as a vehicle for collective memory, ancestral trauma, and cultural dislocation within the Soviet ideological landscape. Despite these contextual differences, both authors construct silence not as an absence of meaning but as its most concentrated form, functioning as a counternarrative that subverts official discourse and recuperates suppressed human experience. The study contributes to the growing body of comparative research on silence in world literature and proposes a tripartite analytical framework applicable across cultural traditions.

Keywords

silence; narrative device; Chingiz Aitmatov; Franz Kafka; comparative literature; narratology; modernism; communicative failure; collective memory; existential alienation.

INTRODUCTION

In literary studies, silence has long occupied a paradoxical position: it is simultaneously an absence and a presence, a void that is charged with communicative potential. Steiner (1967) argues that language strains perpetually against its own boundaries, and it is precisely at those boundaries that silence begins. Sontag (1969), in her influential essay, describes the aesthetics of silence as a flight from the obligation of language, a strategy through which the artist gestures toward what cannot be adequately contained in words. Yet silence in narrative prose is not merely a philosophical posture; it is a technical device that shapes plot, characterises individuals, and mediates between the readable surface of the text and the unspoken depths beneath it. The present study interrogates the concept of silence as a narrative device in the prose of Chingiz Aitmatov and Franz Kafka. The pairing of these two authors is productive precisely because of the apparent asymmetry of their literary worlds. Kafka, writing in German in Prague in the early twentieth century, is widely regarded as the inaugurator of modernist alienation and a literature of the absurd. His characters are perpetually ensnared in systems of authority that communicate nothing coherent, and they respond to this communicative failure

with a silence that is simultaneously bewilderment and protest. Aitmatov, writing in Russian and Kyrgyz from Soviet Central Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century, is anchored in a different literary tradition: the oral epic, the myth of steppe and mountain, the trauma of collectivisation and ideological erasure. Yet both authors make silence a structural and thematic cornerstone of their fiction.

The choice of these two writers for comparative analysis is justified on several grounds. First, both produce prose in which the withholding of information and the failure of communication are not incidental but constitutive: the silences in their texts are never mere gaps but carry interpretive weight that equals or exceeds the spoken or narrated content. Second, while individual studies of silence in Kafka (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986; Borchardt, 2010) and in Aitmatov (Corti, 2018; Connelly, 2015) exist, a systematic comparative analysis of this device across both bodies of work has not previously been undertaken. Third, the cultural and ideological distances between these authors make their convergence at the level of narrative technique theoretically significant, suggesting that silence as a narrative strategy may transcend cultural boundaries to address shared dimensions of modern human experience.

The article is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the primary forms and functions of silence as a narrative device in the selected prose works of Aitmatov and Kafka? (2) In what respects do the two authors employ silence in structurally similar ways, and where do their uses of silence diverge? (3) What do the convergences and divergences reveal about silence as a cross-cultural literary strategy in the twentieth century? The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the study of two individual authors. As Mukherjee (2019) observes, narrative lacunae and the ethics of silence are among the most urgent concerns in contemporary world literature studies, precisely because silence is the space in which suppressed voices, erased histories, and untranslatable experiences continue to exert pressure on the text. By mapping the topography of silence in Aitmatov and Kafka, this study contributes to that broader conversation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical literature on silence in modern fiction is substantial but unevenly distributed. Theoretical approaches originating in philosophy, linguistics, and narratology provide the foundational vocabulary for this study. Picard's The World of Silence (1948/2002) remains one of the earliest sustained meditations on silence as a condition of being, one that language must perpetually violate. Steiner (1967) radicalises this perspective by arguing that the Holocaust and the catastrophes of twentieth-century totalitarianism have placed language under a specifically modern pressure, making silence an ethical as much as an aesthetic position. Sontag (1969) extends this line of thinking into aesthetics, describing how the artwork's aspiration toward silence represents a drive to escape the banality of language and to touch the real. Within narratology, Genette's (1980) concept of ellipsis provides the most immediate technical framework for analysing silence at the level of story and discourse. Ellipsis, for Genette, is the narrative suppression of story time, a gap in the text through which events pass without being narrated. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) develops this account, noting that ellipses may be explicit (the text acknowledges what it omits) or implicit (the gap is perceptible only by inference), and that implicit ellipses are the more disturbing, since they cannot be measured against what the reader already knows. Iser's (1978) reader-response theory offers a complementary perspective: gaps and indeterminacies are not failures of the text but productive structures that recruit the reader's participation in the construction of meaning.

On Kafka specifically, Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) study of Kafka as a minor literature writer is foundational. They argue that Kafka's narrative strategy involves the deliberate deterritorialisation of language, stripping it of its expressive plenitude so that what remains is gesture, procedure, and the silence that underlies all bureaucratic speech. Borchardt (2010) offers a more text-centred analysis of silence in Kafka's narratives, distinguishing between the silence of institutions (the law, the court, the castle authorities), the silence of characters who cannot or will not explain themselves, and the structural silences of narratives that refuse resolution. Anderson (2001) situates Kafkan silence within the tradition of language-scepticism in Central European modernism, connecting it to the Sprachkrise articulated by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and other German-language writers of the early twentieth century.

Scholarship on Aitmatov and silence is less theoretical and more context-specific. Corti (2018) analyses how Aitmatov uses narrative gaps and repressed memory in his fiction as a means of encoding what Soviet censorship forbade the text to say directly. Connelly (2015) examines modernist strategies in Central Asian literature more broadly, noting Aitmatov's sophisticated use of temporal ellipsis and the unspoken to navigate the constraints of socialist realism. Kovacs (2012) provides a comparative framework for Central and Eastern European fiction under totalitarianism, arguing that silence functions in these literatures as a form of encrypted dissent: the text speaks through what it cannot say. The theoretical underpinning of this study draws on Bachtin's (1981) concept of the dialogic text, in which every utterance implies not only what is said but the responses, counter-voices, and silences that surround it. Herman's (2009) cognitive narratology offers additional tools, particularly his account of how readers fill narrative gaps through inferential reasoning. Said's (1994) analysis of the relationship between imperial culture and the voices it silences provides a useful contextual frame for understanding Aitmatov's use of silence as political resistance. Together, these frameworks enable the tripartite analytical model - communicative silence, structural silence, and existential silence - proposed in this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary corpus consists of five prose works: from Aitmatov, The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (1980, henceforth DLMTHY) and The White Steamship (1970, henceforth TWS); from Kafka, The Trial (1925, henceforth T), The Castle (1926, henceforth C), and The Metamorphosis (1915, henceforth M). These texts were selected on the basis of three criteria: critical consensus regarding their centrality to each author's oeuvre; the relative density of silence as a theme and device within each text; and the availability of reliable scholarly translations that do not significantly distort the silences encoded in the originals.

Aitmatov's DLMTHY is widely regarded as his masterpiece and the most formally complex of his novels, combining myth, memory, and Soviet realism in a structure that itself enacts the suppression and recovery of buried knowledge. TWS, the earlier novella, presents silence as a child's withdrawal from an intolerable reality into the protective fiction of a story. Kafka's three texts were chosen because each stages silence differently: M presents the silence of a family system collapsing around an untranslateable transformation; T dramatises the silence of the law, which explains nothing and demands everything; C depicts the silence of authority extended to spatial and architectural scale. Together, these five texts provide sufficient comparative material while remaining analytically tractable.

The study employs a comparative literary method combining close reading with narratological analysis. Close reading, as theorised by Eagleton (2008) and practised in the tradition of Anglo-American literary criticism, attends to the texture of the text at the level of word, sentence, and

scene, identifying the precise formal operations through which meaning is produced. Narratological analysis, informed primarily by Genette (1980), Rimmon-Kenan (2002), and Bal (1997), examines silence at the level of narrative structure: how stories are told, what is omitted, who speaks and who is silenced, and how the temporal and spatial arrangement of narrated events creates gaps that function as meaning.

The comparative dimension of the study follows the methodology of typological comparison rather than genetic connection. Aitmatov and Kafka did not directly influence one another; the resemblances identified in this study are therefore not matters of literary-historical borrowing but of structural and thematic convergence. Wellek and Warren's (1956) distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic approaches to comparative literature governs the analysis: while historical and biographical context is adduced where relevant, the primary emphasis is on the internal formal properties of the texts. This approach aligns with what Strelka (1971) describes as the poetics of comparison: the identification of structural analogies that illuminate the literary work in its own terms.

The analytical framework of three types of silence - communicative, structural, and existential - was derived inductively from the primary texts through iterative close reading and subsequently validated against the theoretical literature. Each type was defined by its formal marker in the text (absence of dialogue, ellipsis, thematic motif), its narrative function (how it shapes plot, character, and meaning), and its contextual resonance (what cultural, ideological, or philosophical freight it carries). This tripartite framework is proposed not as a universal taxonomy but as a heuristic that proves productive for these particular texts and may be tested and modified in subsequent comparative studies.

RESULTS

The most immediately legible form of silence in both Aitmatov and Kafka is communicative silence: the breakdown or refusal of language as a medium of exchange between characters. In Kafka's fiction, this breakdown is systematic and institutional. In The Trial, Josef K. is arrested and subjected to a legal process that no one will explain to him. The court communicates through procedural ceremony rather than intelligible statement; the Advocate speaks at length without clarifying Josef K.'s situation; the priest recounts a parable whose meaning is explicitly declared to be inexhaustible and therefore effectively withheld. The authorities do not refuse to speak; they speak constantly, but their speech is engineered to produce incomprehension. Silence here is not the absence of language but its pathological excess: so much is said that nothing is communicated.

This paradox is even more pronounced in The Castle. K.'s repeated attempts to make contact with Klamm - the official who represents, however obscurely, the authority of the Castle - are frustrated not by refusal but by procedural inaccessibility. Klamm issues communiques in writing that are ambiguous and possibly inapplicable; he is reported to have spoken, but his words reach K. only through intermediaries who disagree about their content and import. The Castle's silence is architectural: authority is housed in a structure that is visible from the village but never reached, whose communications are always already translations of something that was never directly uttered. As Borchardt (2010) observes, Kafkan authority rules through the production of silence disguised as speech.

Aitmatov's use of communicative silence is differently inflected but structurally analogous. In DLMTHY, the central myth of the mankurt - a slave who has been tortured into complete amnesia and whose mother calls to him in vain before being shot on his orders - is the most

extreme image of communicative silence in Aitmatov's work. The mankurt does not refuse to answer; he has been destroyed as a communicative being. His mother's voice, crying his name, falls into a void that was once a human interiority. The political resonance of this silence is unmistakable: Soviet collectivisation and ideological coercion have produced populations who cannot remember what they have been made to forget. The communication that has been severed is not merely personal but transgenerational, the chain of cultural memory that keeps communities alive in time.

In TWS, communicative silence operates at the level of the child protagonist's relationship with the adult world. The boy cannot share his inner world - his imaginative identification with the white steamship on the lake, his mythological account of his own origins - because the adults around him have made the world inhospitable to such speech. He tells his stories to himself, and to an imagined audience, but never to the adults who might hear and dismiss them. When the horror of the deer's slaughter by his grandfather Orozkul makes continued imagination impossible, the boy's ultimate silence - his death - is the logical conclusion of a world in which authentic communication has been foreclosed.

Beyond the thematic representation of communicative failure, both Aitmatov and Kafka deploy silence as a structural device: the deliberate withholding of narrative information that generates interpretive energy in the gap. In Genette's (1980) terms, these are ellipses - moments where story time passes without being narrated, or where the narrator declines to account for what has occurred. But in both Kafka and Aitmatov, ellipses are rarely neutral; they are the points where the text's deepest meanings are concentrated. In The Metamorphosis, the most structurally significant silence concerns the explanation of Gregor Samsa's transformation. Kafka provides no account of how or why Gregor has become a vermin. The narrative begins in medias res with the transformation already accomplished and never revisited. This ellipsis is not a puzzle to be solved but a permanent condition of the text: the transformation's cause is withheld not because the author does not know it but because the absence of explanation is the point. As Iser (1978) argues, the productive gap obliges the reader to participate in the construction of meaning, and the range of readings that critics have supplied for Gregor's transformation - economic alienation, family pathology, Jewish self-hatred, the impossibility of art - testifies to the fecundity of this particular silence. Aitmatov's structural silences operate differently but with comparable effect. In DLMTHY, the narrative is constructed around the figure of Yedigei, an old railway worker who has spent his life in the Sary-Ozeki steppe, and the story of his friend Qazangap, whose funeral frames the novel. The text moves constantly between present action and embedded mythological narrative, and the transitions between these temporal registers are managed through gaps that the reader must negotiate. The novel is also constructed around an absent centre: the satellite tracking station that dominates the landscape is never fully explained, and the rockets launched from it carry a payload whose nature is withheld. This structural silence in the external, technological plot mirrors the internal silence of Yedigei's half-suppressed memories and desires. Particularly significant is Aitmatov's handling of the mankurt myth as an inset narrative. The myth is introduced at several removes from the primary narrative and told by characters whose reliability is qualified by their own cultural displacement. The full account of the mankurt's making is not provided all at once; it accumulates through fragments, each of which leaves something unsaid. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) notes that fragmented or distributed narrative structures produce interpretive suspense not through plot mystery but through hermeneutic uncertainty: the reader is not sure what the fragments add up to, or whether they add up at all. Aitmatov's structural silences exploit this uncertainty to make

the reader's experience of the text analogous to the characters' experience of their own fractured cultural memory.

The deepest and most pervasive form of silence in both authors is what this study terms existential silence: the condition of characters who confront a world that offers no answers to fundamental questions about their existence, identity, or purpose. This form of silence is less a technique than a thematic and philosophical orientation, but it is enacted through specific narrative choices and thus remains amenable to formal analysis. For Kafka, existential silence is inseparable from his metaphysics of authority. In The Trial, Josef K. is guilty without knowing of what; in The Castle, K. is seeking access to an authority that may not exist in the form he imagines. Both protagonists are constituted by their relation to a power that withholds the fundamental information they need to live - the definition of their guilt, the terms of their acceptance. This withholding is not malicious in any personal sense; it is structural. The world of Kafka's fiction is not one in which authority has chosen to be silent; it is one in which authority is silence, in the sense that it is constitutively unable to provide the intelligible account of itself that its subjects require. As Lukacs (1971) argues in his account of the modern novel, the hero of modernity is always seeking a meaning that the world cannot provide, and it is this gap between the hero's desire for significance and the world's impassivity that Kafka intensifies to its logical extreme.

Aitmatov's existential silence is located at a different cultural coordinates but is equally fundamental. In DLMTHY, the central existential question is the question of cultural continuity: whether a people can survive the systematic erasure of their collective memory, whether identity can persist when the chain of transmission has been broken. The mankurt's silence is not merely communicative but ontological: he has been silenced at the level of being, reduced from a cultural subject to a function. The mother who calls to him and is killed is calling not just to her son but to the possibility of human continuity across time, and the mankurt's inability to respond - his silence - is the novel's deepest image of what totalitarianism does to the human.

In TWS, the child's ultimate silence - his drowning - is the culmination of an existential trajectory in which the world has refused to accommodate the inner life. The boy cannot make himself heard in the world of the adults, and the story he tells himself - the consoling myth of the horned deer mother - is destroyed when his grandfather kills the last of the deer. Having lost the narrative that made his existence meaningful, the boy has no resource against the silence that the world has imposed on him. Ong (1982) argues that oral cultures maintain a different relationship to silence than literate cultures, and Aitmatov's work can be read as a meditation on what happens when an oral culture's relationship to its own silences is disrupted by the homogenising force of literate modernity.

The comparison of silence in Aitmatov and Kafka reveals both structural convergences and significant contextual divergences. At the structural level, both authors use silence as a device for representing the situation of the individual confronting an institutional or ideological power that will not explain itself. In both cases, this confrontation produces a characteristic narrative posture: the protagonist circles around a centre of authority or meaning that recedes as he approaches, and the circling is rendered through a narrative that withholds the resolution it seems to promise. The absence of resolution - the structural silence at the end of The Trial, the open ending of DLMTHY - is not a failure of the narrative but its most precise statement.

The divergences are equally instructive. Kafka's silence is urban, bureaucratic, and modernist in its formal properties: it belongs to a tradition of European literature in which the crisis of

language is also a crisis of individual subjecthood, and in which the individual's isolation is the condition of his literary existence. Aitmatov's silence is steppe-wide, communal, and rooted in oral tradition: it belongs to a literature in which the individual's silence is always also the community's silence, and in which the loss of voice is experienced as the loss of collective identity. Where Kafka's characters are silent in the presence of an overwhelming system, Aitmatov's characters are silent because the system has erased the cultural framework within which speech was possible.

This difference can be mapped onto the distinction between what Said (1994) calls metropolitan and peripheral silences: the silence of the individual confronting the opacity of modern institutional life, and the silence of the colonised or dominated culture whose languages and narratives have been suppressed by imperial power. Kafka's Prague, though itself a site of cultural marginality, represents a metropolitan literary culture in which the crisis is primarily one of individual consciousness. Aitmatov's Kyrgyzstan represents a peripheral culture in which the crisis is one of collective survival. Both crises produce silence, but the silence carries different weight and points in different directions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study invite several broader reflections on silence as a cross-cultural literary strategy. The first concerns the relationship between silence and power. In both Aitmatov and Kafka, silence is not politically neutral. It is produced by power - by institutions, ideologies, and social systems that have an interest in keeping certain truths unspoken - and it is simultaneously a response to power, a way of preserving what cannot be spoken without risk. The paradox identified in the results, that silence can be both an instrument of oppression and a form of resistance, is central to the literature on silence in world literature more broadly (Mukherjee, 2019; Kovacs, 2012). Bachtin's (1981) concept of the dialogic text is particularly illuminating here. For Bachtin, every utterance is in dialogue with other utterances, including those that it suppresses or responds to implicitly. The silences in Aitmatov and Kafka are dialogic in precisely this sense: they carry within them the traces of what has been suppressed and the possibility of what has not yet been said. The mankurt's silence is in dialogue with his mother's cry; Josef K.'s bewilderment is in dialogue with the law's untransparent authority. Reading these silences as dialogic restores their communicative dimension without reducing them to mere coded speech.

The second reflection concerns the relationship between silence and form. Both Aitmatov and Kafka are authors in whom thematic concerns are inseparable from formal innovations, and the analysis of silence confirms this integration. The structural silences in their texts - the ellipses, the withheld explanations, the unresolved endings - are not ornamental but constitutive: they are the forms in which the thematic concerns are most concisely expressed. This finding supports Cuddon's (2013) observation that in the best literary fiction, technique and meaning are not separable, and it suggests that any account of silence that focuses only on theme while neglecting form will be incomplete. The third reflection concerns the implications of the comparative method itself. The pairing of Aitmatov and Kafka might seem counterintuitive, and it would be possible to argue that their differences outweigh their similarities. The analysis presented in this study suggests otherwise: the structural convergences are real and significant, and they illuminate aspects of both bodies of work that would not be visible in single-author study. Aitmatov's silence is made more precise when compared with Kafka's, because the comparison foregrounds the communal and cultural dimensions of Aitmatov's silence that might otherwise be taken for granted. Kafka's silence is enriched by the comparison because

Aitmatov's work demonstrates that the alienation Kafka describes is not exclusively a European or modernist phenomenon but a condition that arises wherever power forecloses the possibility of authentic human communication. This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the corpus, while carefully selected, is limited to five texts, and both Aitmatov and Kafka have produced bodies of work that extend beyond these examples. Further research should test the tripartite framework proposed here against a wider range of texts from both authors. Second, the analysis has been conducted primarily in English, using translations; while every effort has been made to be sensitive to translation issues, a definitive study would require engagement with Kafka's German and Aitmatov's Russian and Kyrgyz originals. Third, the focus on formal analysis, while justified by the methodological premises of the study, means that some aspects of the cultural and historical contexts have been treated schematically. Future work might address these limitations through a fuller historicisation of the silences identified here.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study has demonstrated that silence functions as a systematic and multidimensional narrative device in the prose of both Chingiz Aitmatov and Franz Kafka. Through the analysis of communicative silence, structural silence, and existential silence across five primary texts, the study has shown that both authors construct silence not as an absence of meaning but as its most concentrated form - a counternarrative that speaks precisely through what it withholds. While the cultural, historical, and ideological contexts in which Aitmatov and Kafka deploy silence are significantly different, the structural convergences between their uses of this device are real and theoretically significant, suggesting that silence as a narrative strategy addresses perennial conditions of human existence: the confrontation with power that will not explain itself, the loss of cultural continuity, and the aspiration toward a truth that language can approach but never fully contain. The tripartite analytical framework proposed in this study - communicative, structural, and existential silence - offers a heuristic that may be productively applied in other comparative contexts, and the pairing of Aitmatov and Kafka points toward a broader agenda for world literature research that takes seriously the formal and philosophical dimensions of non-Western literary traditions without subordinating them to a Eurocentric comparative framework. As Steiner (1967) observed more than half a century ago, the literature of the twentieth century has been marked above all by what it could not or would not say. The works of Aitmatov and Kafka remain among the most searching and formally accomplished explorations of that condition, and their comparison opens a productive space for continued inquiry. Future research might extend this framework to other authors who occupy analogous positions at the intersection of individual and collective silence, such as the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, or the Uzbek poet Zulfiya, in order to test whether the convergences identified here reflect a broader pattern in twentieth-century world literature or are specific to the particular conditions of Aitmatov's and Kafka's historical situations.

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