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## The Lacuna as a Cultural Phenomenon: Analyzing Martin Camaj's "Circles"

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### Abstract

*The Lacuna theory is the most recognized theory in the field of ethno psycholinguistics at present. Lacunas are phenomena that show how languages and cultures differ in their cognitive structures. They are lexical entities that belong only to a certain culture and language and do not have equivalents in other cultures and languages. The Lacuna theory is used as a theoretical framework for the explanation of different linguistic-cultural issues arising during textual interpretation. The novel "Circles" is very rich in linguistic entities containing encoded cultural information which make this text a very hermetic one, especially for a reader belonging to a different cultural background. Through the application of the lacuna theory we will provide an alternative interpretation of this complex novel. The present article will also cover issues regarding the definition of culture and its relation with language as well as the importance of cultural background knowledge in textual interpretation.*

**Keywords:** lacuna theory, culture, text interpretation, semantics, lexical entities

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### 1. Introduction

We are all aware of the complexity of a literary text as well as of the impossibility of providing a unique and uniform interpretation of it. This is even more difficult in the case of texts who encode a series of semantic entailments within them. These entailments can be of a cultural and/or social nature. However, there exist different theories who provide an alternative solution to this issue. One of these is the so called Lacuna Theory, developed by Sorokin and followed by a series of other linguists since 1950, which is an essential branch of ethno psycholinguistics today. Lacuna, or sometimes referred as "vacancy" "gap", can be defined as the unique cultural or language phenomena which exist in one culture, but whose equivalence cannot be found in another culture because of different social customs, beliefs, ideology, geographical features, etc. The identification of these gaps within the text would offer a uniform interpretation of it. This is also the case of the first psychological Albanian novel "Circles" which is quite rich in lacunas and at the same time very hermetic and difficult to understand by the reader. Martin Camaj is a well known Albanian author whose works are also considered as an encyclopedia of the northern Albanian customs and culture. Through the identification and the explanation of the text's lacunas we will try to offer a complete explanation of it.

### 2. The Definition of "Culture"

Culture has been studied broadly even within the domain of anthropology and many specialists of the field, have given their own definitions about it. Edward Tylor, for example, defines culture as: that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of a society (Wiel). Stephen Greenbalt adds to the definition of Tylor the idea that the word "culture" is also used to indicate a specific or particular group, such as: youth culture, black culture, aristocratic culture etc. (Greenbalt, 1990) He assumes that the concept of culture is always on mobility, changing and developing all the time. However there are some rules that govern it. The rules that govern culture are imposed by the society, of course. In every society there is a set of do's and don'ts that has to be respected by its members. He also asserts that culture is tied with literature in every respect. We are all aware of the importance of the cultural context in the explanation of a literary work. When analyzing a piece of literature from the cultural point of view, we must consider the difference between the values embodied in the work and our own values as well as the social understandings upon which the work depends.

Martin Camaj is well known for using folklore material in his works. The same happens with the novel "Circles". Considered to be the first psychological Albanian novel, it is set in the area of the Albanian highlands, the village of Ripa. Thus, it works as a distant mirror of that particular area's world, describing concrete social actions of individuals in a specific time and in specific conditions of existence. This novel is also considered as one of the first literary manifestos against the Stalinist system in Albania. It offers a living image of the general feeling that prevailed the country through the

vivid descriptions of concrete social and political issues which caused a sense of fear and anxiety among its citizens. (Berisha A. N., 2010, p. 88) The narrative is perceived as cyclic and trustful based on real life, or at its worst, on the illusion of reality.

The novel mainly treats the relation between the individual and the society. It presents a system based on circles and hierarchy which only aims at empowering the ruling class, as well as It transforms the individuals, making them surrender to collectivity and give up on their ideals. Inside the same system we find Camaj's characters. Bardhi, Agon, Baci, Drenashi, Ylli, Sosja and Zoga are all different from each other but at the same time they are so similar. They are representatives of the individual inside the system and at the same time they are typical north Albanian characters.

### 3. Discourse as Culture

Language is not just a means of expressing cultural values, but it is itself a cultural value. The realization of language in discourse also requires a cultural competence. According to Coseriu linguistic discourse is a cultural activity. He makes two general observations that support the idea that language is a cultural activity. (Coseriu, 2007, p. 70)

- (A) that language is (1) a generally-human activity, carried out by individuals
  - (2) as representatives of cultural traditions of speech competence
  - (3) at an individual level;
- (B) that any cultural *activity*, including the activity of speaking, can be regarded
  - (a) as activity as such,
  - (b) as the knowledge or competence underlying the activity, and
  - (c) as the product of that activity. (Coseriu, 2007, p. 71)

The two triads (3 levels of manifestation and 3 points of view) delineate nine aspects of language as a creative cultural activity, aspects which, according to Coseriu, can also be found as such in the intuitive knowledge of speakers. His theory is summed up in the following table:

		Point of View	
Level	Activity	Competence	Product
Universal	Speech in general	Elocution knowledge	Totality of utterances
Historical	Concrete particular language	Idiomatic knowledge	Abstract particular language
Individual	Discourse	Expressive knowledge	Text

(Coseriu, 2007, p. 79)

In every act of discourse there are three main levels of content: sign, meaning, significance.

### 4. The Lacuna-a Phenomenon of Culture

The lacuna is a semantic entity, a contextual cultural invariant, which provides a degree of non compatibility between two or more semantic systems. Lacunas are always studied from a double perspective: linguistic and cultural. They are born as a result of the confrontation between systems and contexts. The concept of lacuna has been developed within the Russian ethnopsycholinguistics. It focuses on the problems of text comprehension and communication problems between different cultures. Cultural differences and similarities are an integral part of the lacuna model. The model helps to explain the reasons why different cultures have very specific ways of communicating (Grodzki, 2003, p. 78). The lacuna theory helps us "to recognize the "cultural glasses" we wear when encountering an intercultural situation. Through our "cultural glasses" we filter reality. (Ertelt-Vieth, 1999, p. 83) They determine how we perceive and thus interpret culture. The lacuna model, first introduced by J. Sorokin, represents a framework for the systematic characterization and classification of cultural differences in communication. Thus, lacunas are generally speaking a term for describing items that exist in one culture, but are not found in another. J. Sorokin defined lacunas as phenomena of culture that have no equivalents in another culture regarding both linguistic and cultural specifics. (Panasiuk, 2009, p. 42)

#### 4.1 Classification of Lacunas

Lacunas can be verbal or non verbal or linguistic or cultural. (Sorokin, 1994 , p. 182) Linguistic lacunas can be: lexical, grammatical and stylistic. Cultural lacunas can be emotive and ethnographic.

#### 4.1.1 Linguistic lacunas

Linguistic lacunas generally include words or groups of words who are very closely related to the culture of the country where the work belongs. They can also be words or phrases who belong to the personal world of the author, thus they are created by him or adopted in different contexts by him and serve a particular stylistic purpose. There is a great amount of such words in the novel "Circles". The translation provided for this article does not have the exact meaning of the original due to the above mentioned characteristics of the lacunas. Let us examine some of the most interesting ones:

Ex. *Pyeste ndjellakeqas me frymën e mallëngjimit të trishtë...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 164) (in a pessimistic way)

The adverb *ndjellakeqas* is not found in any Albanian dictionary. It might be a creation of the author.

Ex. *Edhe ajo prej naltësisë ku gjindej kundronte mirakandas gjakimin e pasueshëm të Novelstit ....* (Camaj, 1978, p. 298) (with delight)

Ex. .... *here tue dale në kodër si mbas mirakandjes së atij që kishte ndërtue kështjellën atje në majë...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 115) (delight)

The adverb *mirakandas* can be a creation of the author as well. In this novel as well as in some other novels Camaj makes extensive usage of the noun *mirakandje*, which belongs to the speech of the northern Albanian city of Shkodër. However the adverbial form is not found in any dictionary.

Ex. *Tha nën zë Bardhi prishakandas ...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 291) (grudging)

*Prishakandas* is another adverb created by the author using one of his famous forms of affixation, the suffix – *kandas*.

Ex. *Tue ecë pothuajse symbyllas shkelën dikund në një skaj në turrë arrash ....* (Camaj, 1978, p. 252) (with his eyes closed)

Ex. .... *në pikën e territ gjatësinë e kthinave tue prekë symbyllas gunga e kthesa ....* (Camaj, 1978, p. 262) (with their eyes closed)

In both sentences we find a folkloristic expression. The idea derives from a traditional game, very popular in the north west region of Malësia e Madhe, called *symshilaza*. It similar to the peek a boo game and involves closing one's eyes and looking for other people keeping the eyes closed.

Ex. *Por shi ky momenti i lutjes asht për mue vështrimplotë dhe më ka pëlqye gjithnjë.* (Camaj, 1978, p. 256) (meaningful)

The adverb *vështrimplotë* which derives from the noun *vështrim* (look), is not used here with the literal meaning of the noun. It acquires a completely different meaning.

#### 4.1.2 Cultural lacunas

As Shakhovsky also states in his "About linguistics of emotions", many aspects of the human activity are not simply transferred by words: language is poorer than the validity and its semantic space does not cover the whole world (Shakhovsky, 2008). That is why cultural elements are very important when interpreting a text. Camaj is well known for using folklore material in his works and for giving authentic nicknames to his characters in order to provide a complete portrayal of the background. Cultural lacunas involve the usage of special names or forms of expressions connected to elements of national folklore, epos and heroes of national literature which associate in the speaker's consciousness with the display of various qualities of expression appearance etc.

*Tha të vogël Novelisti tue i shtri dorën Bacit...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 256) (The short story writer)

*Novelisti zbuloi në Zeshkanin tipin e Cubit...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 256) (The dark skin boy) (The Gangster)

*Në atë kohë Vajtorja do përsëri do të shkonte me u la ....* (Camaj, 1978, p. 186) (The Mourner)

*...vërejtë Folkloristë tue folë në vesh ....* (Camaj, 1978, p. 142) (The Folklorist)

*Mandej i lëshoi një vështrim nënçmues prej cinikut Leshkuqit...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 142) (The red haired boy)

*I banë vend pranë Folkloristit e Rapsodit.* (Camaj, 1978, p. 138) (The Folklorist, The Rhapsodist)

*Noshta për llegalin dhuna s'ka farë qëmtimi ngjyre.* (Camaj, 1978, p. 147) (The Illegal)

*Bariu me fjalë të veta tregoi përmbajtjen e kangës.* (Camaj, 1978, p. 149) (The Shepherd)

*... përflietë se kishte marrëdhënie me Orë e Zana...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 151) (The Fairies)

*Por Virgjinë e guximshme mbas një viti u vesh përsëri si grue brenda shtëpisë...* (Camaj, 1978, p. 198) (The Virgin)

*Atyne që e libruen Fetarin hashetash e gjilpanash u dha shej Këshilltari që ta pranonin andej..* (Camaj, 1978, p. 262) (The Religios) (The Councillor)

## 5. Conclusions

The lacuna is a cultural phenomenon which helps decoding the meaning of complex literary texts. Lacunas are gaps found inside the text whose filling would provide the reader with a very useful information for the complete embracing of meaning of the text itself. The lacunas include lexical or cultural information relevant and meaningful only in the text's language and culture and do not have equivalents in other languages and cultures. The novel "Circles" is very rich in linguistic entities containing encoded cultural information which make this text a very hermetic one, especially for a reader belonging to a different cultural background. It contains a lot of emotional lacunas which are related with the direct perception of reality from a language's speaker. In the novel they are displayed through the usage of some specific nicknames for the characters. The lacunas are also ethnographic containing an encoded information that only a speaker of Albanian can understand. However the text contains some linguistic lacunas as well, mainly textual lacunas who point out the temporal and spatial distance between the reader and the work, thus making it a very hermetic text.

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