



HEARING THE UNHEARABLE: A DIALOGUE OF SILENCE IN
CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD BY MARK MEDOFF

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Article information

Received:13/12/2022
Accepted: 11/1/2023
Published online:18/1/2023
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.1.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.1.1)

ABSTRACT

The majority of works of literature depict the world of what many people call normal characters, in this case the characters without disabilities, especially the deaf. Mark Medoff's play, *Children of Lesser God*, depicts a world of a deaf character who has been neglected by his surrounding many for the reason that she (Sarah) cannot understand the world of normal people. However, this study analyzes the structure of discourses made by Sarah to show the fact that unlike the majority of characters in the play, the silent world of Sara is full of diverse deep psychological insight, none of which are identifiable for the other characters. In this article, it will be shown that what deaf people can understand from their surroundings is more than the grasp of common people's words and actions. They, in fact, are capable of understanding what goes under the very seemingly unimportant words or deeds of common people. Consequently, this article leads to the realization that the silence of this minor group of disabled people is full of polyphonies and, therefore, this article uses some of Bakhtin's polyphonic discourse types to shed light on the abundance of such facts. The final stage of this study depicts the world of deaf people as a world belonging neither to common humans, nor what common humans think of these deaf individuals; they, in fact, experience a third-world in which any signification is necessarily deep in terms of its thematic structure.

Mark Medoff, the contemporary American playwright, tries to illuminate the communication difficulties of deaf people in a world where they are cast alone. A very shallow analysis of the drama makes it transparent that many critics of current age, even the most critical ones, will surely go through the problematic aspect of disabled people portrayed in this literary piece. But by looking *awry*, it would not become too absurd to infer that Bakhtinian codes of narration are so prevalent in the text. Whereas Bakhtin tries to show the *dialogic*, or *polyphonic*, features of language in general, Medoff has attempted to show the same concerns in the bizarre- or maybe the **unknown**- world of deaf people.

Starting the drama by a quote from Sarah, Medoff shows that even the silent world of deaf people is full of sounds and dialogues: "Sarah: Me have nothing. Me deafy. Speech inept. Intelligence –tiny blockhead. English blow away. Left one you. Depend-no. think myself enough. Join, unjoined" (1). But what does this feature of polyphonism can signify within this world of silence? According to Bakhtin, in addition to the sense of *carnivalism* that a polyphonic text from a range of behaviors can bring is not only a matter of *unfinalizability*, but also sense of reliability, too. Medoff, by depicting the world of Sarah and other deaf characters, (might) seek(s)

to show a type of environment in which everything is under the process of polyphonic nature. Deaf subjects are not deaf;

James: I can't enjoy my music because you can't.

Sarah: We can enjoy different things.

... James: But you can enjoy my music. How?

Sarah: Vibrations. (60)

The preceding excerpt comes to a climactic focus when James does deprive Sarah from understanding anything out of audible world. As a matter of fact, these dialogues, though from different symbolic spheres, enable all the parties encircling the creation of a literature from inferring a situation which is not an "either-or" case, but a third space which can be exposed only through dialectic steps. Actually, they are deaf physically, but not psychologically: "Sarah: Deafness isn't the opposite of hearing. It's a silence full of sound."

What comes out of these dialogues is the addressing of a third space or situation in which it cannot be explained neither by a normal speaker, nor by a deaf person, but only through the dialogic incarnation of their contacts: "Sarah: I feel split down the middle, caught between two worlds." Indeed, such a location between the two worlds can only be expressed through none of the main languages or voicing of the narrators, but their intermingle.

Other important facet of the play- from the point of view of Bakhtinian analysis- is the sense of search of identity carried out through the symbols. Mark Medoff, in characterization of Sarah's traits, has some contributions towards the sense of individuality in the initial scenes of the play, where the reader comes across with the hidden internal polemics of the Sarah. In fact, the (semi)objective discourse of Sarah can signal the inner inclinations of the character that wants to look for a type of self-individual prototype of identity. This clue is highly detectable in the first quotation of the current paper taken from the text. The other main contemplations over the self-assertion-or self-identification- by means of polyphonic assertions is discernible when Sarah expects James to enter her own private and unique world of deafness in order to understand who she really is. In other words, she remarks on her own sense of closeness towards her own deaf world and asks James she can only keep on the relation and reconcile if he understands her as an "I". But how is this grand and supernatural understanding possible? How can a person with different psychological and physical dispositions get into the depth of a distinct character and understand them as an "I"? The key answer to these and such kinds of questions lay beneath the surface structure of language.

In the language structures of the play, there are two main categories make themselves bare under the production of both speaking and non-hearing characters. Obviously enough, it can be noted that distinct formal discourses of the characters can give them opportunity for further perception of the "other". In a very direct matter, it is clear enough for an implied reader that the difference of two symbolic traditions cannot be the sole matter of concern in the story. The scope of such illumination would be widened if it could be taken into a matter of finding a shared symbolic world of *two's own*. There is, in fact, no way out if they do not go after that. But it must also be caught that finding such an unknown area of intermingling is not an advantage, but only a catastrophic misfortune.

One good example of a misfortune can be reckoned as privilege of control of the other because of the lack of communicative techniques by one of the participants of a social event. This fact is also inescapable in Medoff's play. Whereas the majority of the normal people, capable of speaking and hearing, have their own choices of desires, the lacking minority is always under the authority of the first group. Deaf people, as extensively illuminated in the text, must conform all they have got to the *other* behaviors by the dominant group. They are not allowed to speak to others by their own-made language mediums. They should always be under the surveillance of their parents or encapsulating environment. They are even rejected by their most intimate belongings whenever they come up excessively-or even partially- exhausting. As William P. Wiles mentions in

his critical essay, the sense of beauty is eliminated drastically when it comes to contradiction with the *normal* ideas of *the normal*:

Out of that silence came speech, but it was forced and pained. Out of that silence also came love, strength, self-knowledge and beauty. James' demand that Sarah be normal refuses to acknowledge the idea that normalcy is in the mind and eye of the beholder (1998).

James, highly furious in the climactic scene, discloses his subconscious understanding of Sarah in general, in which the sense of dominations comes to the bare levels of the text:

James: ... You want to talk to me; the *you* learn *my* language.... You've probably been reading lips perfectly for years; but it is a great control game, isn't it? I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak! (86)

All in all, the lack of communication by two different characters, each of which unique in their own symbolization of the world, portrayed by Medoff in the play, does not necessarily mean that there does not exist any communicative levels inside each character and even between them. To mention more directly, it is better to sum up that the influence and understanding of an "*other*" would become more transparent and easier to grasp when we have the voicing chance of them in a more private and unique way. Their symbolization, not through our own language codes, but through theirs is more reliable for the reader when sees them in a *carnavalesque* environment, capable of being in touch with them both in person and by their own *langue*.

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