

## DESIRE AND SILENCE IN KHURSHID DOSTMUHAMMAD'S SHORT STORY "WO AI NI"

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Khurshid Dostmuhammad's short story "WO AI NI" as a significant example of contemporary Uzbek prose that explores linguistic alienation, cross-cultural encounter, and the existential dimensions of human desire. The study situates the story within the context of globalization and urban modernity, focusing on the psychological experience of loneliness, migration, and the limits of communication. Drawing on Roman Jakobson's communication theory, the article interprets the absence of a shared linguistic code as the central dramatic conflict of the narrative. Heidegger's conception of language as the "house of Being" is employed to demonstrate how the failure of communication reveals deeper ontological ruptures rather than mere technical misunderstandings. Through Edward Said's concept of the Other and Bakhtin's notion of exotopy, the Chinese character is analyzed as a reflective mirror for the protagonist's self-alienation. Particular attention is given to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of desire, which elucidates how distance, opacity, and non-possession intensify emotional attachment. The Chinese phrase "WO AI NI" is interpreted as a symbolic sign whose power derives from its resistance to full translation and assimilation. The article argues that the story transforms linguistic incomprehension into an aesthetic and philosophical resource, positioning "WO AI NI" as a sophisticated meditation on silence, desire, and the ethics of otherness in modern literature.

### Keywords

contemporary Uzbek prose; linguistic alienation; cross-cultural communication; desire and distance; psychoanalytic criticism; symbolism; Jacques Lacan; Khurshid Dostmuhammad.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Uzbek literature increasingly engages with the complexities of globalization, cross-cultural encounters, and the problem of linguistic barriers. These themes reflect not merely socio-economic transformations but represent deeper existential questions about cultural identity, the limits of communication, and the possibility of authentic self-expression in an age of proliferating meaning-systems.

Khurshid Dostmuhammad's story "WO AI NI" [14] is one of the literary works in modern Uzbek prose that reveals the issues of urban environment, migration, human alienation, and inner loneliness through subtle psychological observations. While the story appears simple and tranquil in terms of its external plot, it acquires a deep philosophical and aesthetic meaning through its inner content, psychological layers, and system of symbolic details. In this work, rather than focusing on major events or sharp dramatic conflicts, the author brings to the forefront the imperceptible shifts occurring in human consciousness, inner needs, and spiritual voids.

The plot of the work revolves around the daily labor, repetitive actions, and observations of a young man named Bek who works in a kitchen, particularly focusing on his interactions with a mysterious customer who arrives at the same time every day. In the story, the internal perception of time takes precedence over the sequence of events. For Bek, 9:00 PM ceases to be a mere time marker and transforms into a pivotal moment for his psychological state. In this way, the author artistically illustrates the difference between real time and subjective, [13]

psychological time. For Bek, amidst the mechanical nature of his work process and repetitive actions like saying "Hello" and "Bye," these specific moments serve as a "breather" that allows him to access his inner world.

Through the lens of Edward Said's orientalism – *understood not as simple Western projection onto the East, but as any cultural system's construction of the Other* [10, 23] – we can approach the Chinese man as a figure who serves as a mirror for the protagonist's self-alienation rather than as an object of exotic fascination. The encounter with the Other becomes, paradoxically, an encounter with oneself from the outside, enabling what Bakhtin called the "exotopic" position – the ability to see oneself from beyond one's own horizon of consciousness.

The language barrier constitutes the story's primary dramatic conflict. The protagonist cannot speak with the Chinese man – they possess no shared linguistic code. From the perspective of Roman Jakobson's *communication theory*, "*successful communication requires a common code between sender and receiver*" [7, 353]. In "Wo ai ni," this code is absent, creating what communication theory terms a "breakdown of contact." [7, 144] The protagonist finds himself in a paradoxical situation: he desires communication but cannot achieve it.

The main character of Bek is portrayed as a generalized representation of an ordinary person in modern society. He is a protagonist living amidst the concerns of daily life, physical exhaustion, and spiritual needs, searching for meaning in his existence. Bek's inner monologues, assumptions, and self-directed questions serve as important artistic devices in revealing his psychological state [6, 101]. Unlike others who might observe any of the hundreds of customers in the cafeteria, he specifically chooses to watch the "Yellow Collar," attempting to fill his inner void through this selective observation. For Bek, these observations stem more from an internal need rather than being motivated by an external object.

However, Dostmukhammad presents this barrier not as a mere technical problem but as an existential condition pregnant with philosophical significance. According to Martin Heidegger's famous formulation, "*language is the house of Being*" [4, 34] – it is not simply a tool for communication but the fundamental medium through which we understand reality and experience our own existence. When the protagonist confronts the impossibility of speaking with the Chinese man, he simultaneously confronts the limitations of his native language, recognizing its inadequacy for expressing certain dimensions of experience. The language barrier reveals itself to be not merely an obstacle between two people but a fundamental rift between worldviews, value systems, and modes of perceiving reality.

The Uzbek literary scholar Q. Yoldoshev has identified a "*crisis of the word*" in *contemporary prose, wherein native language loses its expressive power and words become emptied of genuine meaning*" [12, 29]. The image of the "Yellow Collar" is devoid of specific biographical details and takes on a symbolic character. It is interpreted as a symbol of exile, loneliness, and silence. His reticence, ordering the same food, sitting in the same place, and eating unhurriedly express a state of withdrawal from life and living with inner burden. Through this character, the author portrays the condition of people living in a modern city but spiritually disconnected from society. The fact that the "Yellow Collar" [13] barely speaks and communicates primarily through his gaze can be evaluated as the power of non-verbal communication.

As the protagonist observes the Chinese man, he begins to see his own life differently. The yellow-collared figure becomes a mirror reflecting back the protagonist's own condition of alienation. In the Chinese man's silence, the protagonist recognizes his own entrapment within empty words, ritualized emotions, and inauthentic modes of communication. He envies the Chinese man – not for anything the man possesses, but for what the protagonist imagines as his freedom from the cultural system's constraints, his ability to live according to his own rhythm rather than society's-imposed tempo.

In the story, artistic detail and symbolism play a crucial aesthetic role. The kitchen setting represents a mechanical, consumption-based model of modern society. Hamburgers, coffee,

strict order at the cash register, and uniform service style indicate that human relationships have become simplified and reduced to mere economic interactions. In this environment, the inscription "WO AI NI" takes on a special significance. This writing is not just a name or random text, but rather a symbol of human affection, understanding, and inner closeness.

The Uzbek literary scholar B. Nazarov has identified a motif of "*cultural self-doubt*" in *post-Soviet literature* [9, 188]. The protagonist experiences his own culture as insufficient – his language is "contaminated," his emotions "false," his communication "ritualized." Chinese culture, by contrast, appears closed, mysterious, and therefore "authentic." This represents a psychological condition arising from existential isolation – the sense of being neither fully rooted in traditional culture nor successfully integrated into global modernity.

Through the Chinese man's figure, Kh. Dostmukhammad illuminates the contemporary Uzbek intellectual's crisis of identity – caught between cultural worlds, unable to return to naive certainty about one's native traditions yet incapable of fully entering alternative cultural systems. The protagonist occupies what postcolonial theory calls a "liminal space" – between identities, between languages, between meaning-systems.[1, 79]

Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky identified "*defamiliarization*" (*ostranenie*) as art's essential function [11, 5]. Art makes the familiar strange, presenting ordinary phenomena from an unfamiliar perspective so that we experience them freshly, as if for the first time. "Wo ai ni" employs this technique on two levels: first, through the Chinese man's figure, and second, through the Chinese phrase itself.

The Chinese phrase functions for the protagonist as what Roland Barthes called an "island of freedom." In his lectures on *idiorrhythmy*, [2, 12] Barthes developed the concept of living according to one's own rhythm rather than the tempo imposed by social structures. Contemporary society, Barthes argued, subjects individuals to what he termed "chronic tyranny" – the constant pressure to synchronize one's rhythms of work, leisure, desire, and speech with socially prescribed norms.

The words "WO AI NI" in the pocket represent the ideological pinnacle of the story. The moment Bek reads this inscription, he perceives it as a name, when in fact it expresses the simplest and deepest feeling that emanates from the human heart. Importantly, these words are not spoken aloud; they exist in silence. The gaze of the "Yellow Collar"[13] in the final scene, with a glimmer of a smile in his eyes, confirms the possibility of wordless understanding between people. Here, the author elevates the concept of love beyond the realm of romantic or personal relationships to the level of universal humanity.

In the work, psychologism emerges as the leading artistic principle. The conflict forms not in external events, but in Bek's inner experiences. Through his waiting, anxiety, joy, and sense of loss, the subtle aspects of the human psyche are revealed. Bek fears that the "Yellow Collar" might not come, as he realizes that through this character, he maintains balance in his inner world. In this respect, the story artistically expresses modern man's need for spiritual support.

Paradoxically, the story suggests that genuine communication may depend on maintaining zones of non-understanding. The protagonist and the Chinese man cannot speak to each other, yet precisely this inability creates a space of profound connection. Hans-Georg Gadamer's *philosophical hermeneutics* offers insight here through his concept of the "fusion of horizons." [3, 14] For Gadamer, genuine understanding occurs not when one consciousness perfectly mirrors another but when two different worldviews meet and generate new meanings through their interaction.

Jacques Lacan's *psychoanalytic views allow for a deeper understanding of the problem of communication, desire, and understanding* [8, 41] in the story "WO AI NI." According to Lacan's theory, a person's desire is never directed at an object that can be fully mastered or fully realized. On the contrary, desire is always directed towards something unattainable, inaccessible, mysterious, and unknown. If the object of desire is fully understood, mastered, and "mastered,"

then the desire itself disappears. Therefore, for Lacan, the presence of desire is closely related to distance, alienation, and lack. As Lacan emphasizes, perfect communication nullifies desire. In the story, the power of the connection between Bek and "Yellow Collar" lies precisely in its wordlessness, discontinuity, and incomprehension. Their relationship is not a real connection, but rather a symbolic link formed in Bek's consciousness. For Bek, "Yellow Collar" [13] transforms from a real person into an image that fills his inner void and responds to his spiritual needs. In this sense, it can be interpreted as Lacan's "object of desire.[8, 54]"

This theoretical approach plays an important role in explaining the nature of the relationship between Beck and "Yellow Collar" in the story. There is neither linguistic unity nor open communication between them. The bek cannot talk to the Chinese customer, cannot penetrate his inner world, and doesn't even know his name. It is this misunderstanding, this "unreachable" state that strengthens Beck's interest and psychological attachment. If they had fully understood each other, conversed simply, or engaged in everyday communication, Beck's inner excitement and aspiration might have faded.

"Wo ai ni" belongs decisively to the writerly category. The story offers an open ending: we never learn how the relationship between the protagonist and the Chinese man develops, whether "wo ai ni" transforms the protagonist's life permanently or temporarily, whether he recovers his native language's expressiveness or remains alienated from it. The author deliberately withholds resolution because the answer must be created by each reader rather than delivered by the text.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, "WO AI NI" stands as a philosophically rich and aesthetically nuanced work that demonstrates the capacity of contemporary Uzbek literature to engage with universal questions of language, identity, and human connection. Far from portraying linguistic barriers as purely negative or obstructive, the story reveals how non-understanding can generate meaningful forms of emotional and ethical relation. Through silence, repetition, and symbolic detail, Dostmuhammad constructs a narrative in which desire is sustained not by possession or clarity, but by distance, mystery, and restraint. The application of psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, and communication theories shows that the protagonist's bond with the Chinese man emerges precisely from the impossibility of complete comprehension. By refusing narrative closure and preserving the opacity of the Other, the story aligns with modernist and postmodernist literary strategies that invite active reader participation. Ultimately, "WO AI NI" affirms that in an age of accelerated communication and cultural hybridity, genuine human connection may arise not from perfect understanding, but from the respectful acceptance of difference, silence, and untranslatable meaning.

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