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TRIBAL WOMEN'S WORD/WORLD: A BAKHTINIAN DIALOGIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand the world of Tribal women and their place in the making and creating of knowledge. The article applies Bakhtin's theory of Heteroglossia and Dialogism to understand the true nature of Tribal women's exclusion from the main stream world of knowledge creation. The article discusses the 'Addressivity' and 'Answerability' of the Tribal woman's word. By citing examples from Gujarati Tribal literature the researcher has tried to prove that the Bakhtin's many voiced theory is applicable in the Tribal literature. The "intention" of the power centers in keeping the Tribal woman's word unheard is questioned and reflected upon throughout the course of the article. Bakhtin's concepts of time, space and value can be used to understand the knowledge used by the Government agencies and the other mainstream organizations to devalue the Tribal world and their own indigenously produced knowledge. The hegemony of the power centers in delimiting the scope and impact of the Tribal languages are also discussed in the article. The politics behind not giving enough space and visibility to the Tribals through these attempts are also discussed here. Bakhtin's Dialogism allows us to examine Tribal women's "other" status and their lack of awareness regarding a very conscious effort by the mainstream society in keeping them excluded from the dialogue. Gujarati Tribal literature is very rich in the portrayal of women as equal stakeholders in the Tribal communities. There is also a rich heritage of reinterpretation of Indian myths with strong women representation. In all, the article tries to understand the Tribal women's world and the gradual loss of their word. Gujarat

**Key Words:** Tribal Women, Heteroglossia, Dialogism, Addressivity, Answerability, Intention

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The Postcolonial world has made possible what seemed impossible a century ago. Theories like Edward Said's Orientalism, Homi Bhabha's Post colonialism, Derrida's Deconstruction and Bakhtin's Dialogism has equipped the contemporary thinker to evaluate and reevaluate all the established fields of knowledge and understanding. If we look closely then we realize that all these theories are based on the binary opposites of

the "self" and the "other". And it is not at all surprising to note that the very people considered to be the "other" in some sense of the word, have proposed most of these theories. The experience of sitting on the margins has given them the critical faculty to see what others especially the ones occupying the 'center' have conveniently ignored.

Bakhtin's Dialogism is a theory that gives voice to the voiceless. In the Indian context there are more "others" than the ones sitting in the center. Yet their representation and its analysis in the field of literature is a fairly recent phenomenon. Bakhtin's insistence on the importance of Heteroglossia gives rise to the possibility of looking at the literatures of that section of the society, which has either been silenced for a very long time or never allowed to be aware of their "otherness". The Tribal communities of India have been marginalized since their very first interactions with the mainstream communities, perhaps since the arrival of the Aryans from due north. Though, some present studies refute the authenticity of the Aryan invasion, saying that the Aryans were never outsiders but that their presence on the Indian Sub-continent is as ancient as the presence of the Dravidians. But as most of us understand from the history that we have been acquainted with, that the Tribals were pushed into the interiors of India, as they were not well equipped in the art of war to fight the strategically powerful and more technologically advanced "outsiders" Aryans.

If we take this to be our base point, then we can regard the Tribals as the "other" and the non-Tribals as the centered presence. The identity of the Tribals has been a matter of debate since time they came in contact with the outside world. The Tribals themselves have no issues about the individual's place in their own societies, but during their interface with the outside world they were astonished on being treated as "outsiders". It was then the issues of identity cropped in. Not only was their perception about themselves different but even their world-views were remarkably different. The mainstream Indian society identified these Tribals as "others", people who did not have a place in the highly segregated and hierarchal society. Bakhtin's views on "intention" can be applied here too. The intention of these mainstream communities behind defining and describing the Tribals seem to have been triggered by selfish motivation. The reason behind this detrimental defining must be to facilitate their unfair dealings and exploitations of the comparatively inexperienced Tribal communities. The concepts of time, space and value can be attached to the knowledge about the Tribals that is not self-generated but produced by the powerful who have the means to create this knowledge. In fact the knowledge, which is documented, is necessarily written whereas most of the Tribal languages are still oral and very few have written grammar and lexicon. The oral Tribal languages are incapable of generating knowledge that is acceptable or useful to the non-Tribal world. Hence the value of thus generated Tribal oriented knowledge remains redundant in the eyes of the "outside"- here "outside" refers to the non-Tribal observer. It is this observer who has great importance for both Bakhtin and Einstein.

The observer is the one who from his time and space creates knowledge that might not be the only truth. The observers in the case of the Tribals are the power centers situated outside their structure- the politically and economically more powerful non-Tribals. The Tribal societies are not a part of the mainstream Indian society, as they do not fall under the purview of the Vedic society divided into four Varna, yet they are certainly influenced by them. The Tribal society is essentially and basically non-discriminatory because it escapes the onslaught of the Caste system. Gender equity is as natural to the Tribal culture as their other tenets. Tribal societies have for a long time been free from Patriarchal control, the reason for this could be their religious beliefs; their Gods are Nature Gods, and Nature is full of representation of both the genders. And so women as a group are not discriminated against, but rather share a happy equation with the men of the tribe. Equal rights for women is not an alien concept for them, it is an undeniable birth right. But the recent interface with the outside world is changing the character of these liberal societies. What is surprising is to see the increasing Patriarchal shift in the mindset of the Tribals from within and without which is again evident in their recently documented literature. First it was the Christian missionaries who brought in the change through their proselyting. Now it is the new religions and sects like Swaminarayan who have taken up the task of "civilizing" the Tribals.

It is this "civilizing" agents who act as the observers of the Tribal societies and indict changes appropriate to their sensibilities. Gujarati Tribal literature is mostly oral, but there have been attempts by

some non-Tribals like Chandrashobha Deshmukh, L.D. Joshi, Nathji Pathak, Pandurang Vanikar, Dr. Bhagwandas Patel, Hasu Yagnik and others to document it in written forms. And Tribals like Lalchand Ninama, Ghelubhai Nayak, Shankarbai and Revaben Tadvī, and others have made tremendous efforts to record and preserve Tribal literature. Dr. Ganesh Devi the director of Tribal Academy, Tejgadh, Gujarat deserves a special mention for his efforts to preserve and highlight the importance of the Tribal languages and culture. Contemporary Tribal writers like Surmal Vahoniya, Jeetendra Vasava and others have taken up the pen to relate the unique Tribal experiences which till recently have been only oral. Most of these oral tales are in the form of songs, which coincide with different times of the day and different seasons of the year. The orally transmitted tales can be sustained only through the knowledge of the language. And most of the Tribal languages are being replaced by the scheduled languages, both in Gujarat and other states with Tribal presence. To quote from Ganesh Devi's foreword to a book about Tribal languages edited by Nima Gandhi, "adivasi languages are rapidly losing ground to the scheduled languages...the rich heritage of literature in these languages is facing the threat of pervasive amnesia" (Devi 1998).

This is precisely what Bakhtin says when he talks about the hegemony of one language and culture over the other. Bakhtin's theory of Heteroglossia is extremely relevant to the Tribal literature and its declining presence. This theory can be seen at work in the interface between Tribal languages and the dominant Gujarati language. The Tribal dialect is one very obvious and irrefutable reason for the powerful centers to look down upon these marginalized sections. The terms with which the Tribals are addressed also reminds one of Bakhtin's views on 'Addressivity' and 'Heteroglossia'. There is an inherent conflict between the Tribal languages and the mainstream languages. The conflict lies in the hegemony and power of those who are in a position to judge and decide the inferior and the superior tongue. And it is this power that decides the center and the 'other'. The education policies of the Government, the employment needs and the general desire to fit in has reduced the Tribal languages to the point of extinction. The Tribals are too naïve to understand the destructive power of the outside influence. The pride associated with one's own language is missing in them and thus its cultural and social importance has no value. Thus it became very easy for the centers to ridicule and destroy the vibrant Tribal languages and with it the strong history and irreplaceable culture.

If this is the situation of Tribal languages on the whole one can just imagine the position of women in not among the Tribals but the theorizing non-Tribals. The Tribal women have traditionally been very strong and equally important in the Tribal culture. But not so in the non-Tribal, seemingly civilized world. Women have always been and conveniently viewed as voiceless non-entities in the non-Tribal world. This is a strange fact for the Tribals who do not discriminate on the basis of Gender. The women of the mainstream culture in India belong to the 'other' class. Their struggle for equality and respect has been oft discussed and analyzed. Today we shall discuss the existence of that class of women who have not been discussed enough: the Tribal women, women who neither follow nor understand the rules of the Patriarchal world. The Tribal women are women who create oral literature as well as participate in it as subjects and performers too. Dr. Bhagwandas Patel notes that,

women have been participating in the story-telling and singing sessions, along with the male performers,...and women especially teenagers create love-songs called "gothiya", through which they express through dance and song the rising passion for the lover without any social or personal restrictions (Patel 2008).

The Tribal women have not been restrained by the society in the matters of heart and body. Sexual freedom has also been a part of the Tribal society. Dr. Patel notes that, "in the Tribal culture women's sexual freedom has been accepted naturally, if a girl has a child as a product of her pre-marital relationship, then her future husband would accept the woman and her child without any grudge or reservation" (Patel 2008). The conflict for Tribal women began after the process of "civilization". The influence of the outside world on the lives of the Tribal women has been extremely demeaning and binding. The patriarchal values gradually found its way in the hearts of the Tribal men. It also discovered many more sympathizers in the Tribal community, more than one would wish. But the truth is that the contemporary Tribal literature is much more patriarchal than the orally transmitted one. From the Bakhtinian perspective the intention of the contemporary Tribal writers is

definitely patriarchal. They seem to be influenced by the viewpoint of the outside world while imagining their women characters. This influence is seen not only in the literature but also amongst the Tribals who have moved out of their Tribal areas and have settled in the cities. They have taken up the teaching of patriarchy as if it was their own. And so now the Tribal women are faced with the issues of Heteroglossia, as their word is taken as the word of the 'other', and thus not given the social value that it deserves.

The Tribal literature of the yesteryears also includes the re-telling of Mahabharata and Ramayana. *Bhilo nu Bharatha* is one such work and there are many instances of men-women interactions in the tales from Mahabharata. The most interesting thing is the presentation of the women characters; in the original Mahabharata women characters like Gandhari, Draupadi, and Kunti are not individually strong characters but mere reflections of the men in their lives. And any attempt to be separate them from their spouses leaves them in a situation wherein they are either exploited or abused, like the 'vastraharan of Draupadi'. In the Tribal version Draupadi is a very well defined character that guides her husbands in conducting the rituals for the salvation of their father. Dr. Patel notes,

As the women characters in the *Bhilo nu Bharatha* are not governed by the moral and values of the patriarchy, Yudhishtir and the other brothers bow down to Draupadi and seek her advice regarding the rituals to be conducted for the salvation of their father, and on her advice they perform Senetaro Yajna (Patel 62).

Women have been given proper due in the oral tradition of the Tribals, but that is changing. The contemporary Tribal writings are more in the imitative phase and so the themes, characterization, and treatment of these works are essentially mainstream. In the oral tradition the women have been portrayed as they are and not as they should be according to the norms alien to them. These women live in their own time and space. The consummation as Bakhtin understands has also been a process that involves the Tribals themselves. But when the interaction with the outside world happened then this point of consummation changed. And the change as expected was neither in the favor of these women nor the Tribals; the outside world brought with it its own value system and then began judging them with their own yardsticks. From the point of view of the non-Tribal value system, the Tribals live an immoral life, full of vices and unethical conduct. This is where we can invoke Bakhtin and his views on Chronotype. Michael Holquist writes while discussing the concept of "subject" and "intention",

In dialogism, "subject" and "intention"... are *positional* or interlocative terms, which is precisely why Chronotype is a necessary component in Bakhtin's project. Chronotype is a term, then, that brings together not just two concepts, but four: a time, plus its value; and a space, plus its value. It (chronotype) is a useful term not only because it brings together time, space, and value, but because it insists on their simultaneity and inseparability (Holquist 155).

This is what we observe in the Tribal literature and its 'value' for the outside world. Literature is a necessarily the mirror of the society, and deciphering the Tribal dialect and then trying to understand its value is a matter of time and space. Bakhtin is right when he insists that the value of the work or a particular language is always from the point of view of the observer. When we observe the Tribal literature as an outsider it is difficult to understand how a Tribal woman can help her husband get his lady-love, like in the folk-tale titled *Rupande-Malade*. Hasu Yagnik writes,

...Chandravali the wife of the hero comes to know that Malade, her husband has given up food and water for Rupande, she herself gets Malade married to Rupande, and Malade himself, does not know that the girl to whom he has married belongs to the Meghvala caste....the attraction subsides and he deserts the woman (Yagnik 85).

This is the influence of the civilized world. The caste consciousness was never a part of the Tribal culture, but in this tale we clearly see how a Tribal man replicates the actions of the casteist culture which is not his own, yet convenient in this instance.

The terms like untouchability did not mean anything for the Tribals, then how come it found its place in the Tribal lore? This is what Bakhtin implies when he says that words themselves do not carry their value but it is something derived through a process of polyphon. Any utterance is many-voiced and not just a single

person speaking. Because the connotations are society-made, they are a product of previous use of the same words. As Bakhtin says the words are never used in their dictionary meaning they are loaded with previous use and with the intention of the user. Malade used two words: a woman and an untouchable, and borrowed the connotations of these two words from the outside, non-Tribal world, in his use and abuse of them. He does not think twice before throwing out the woman who is an untouchable. This story is addressed to the Tribal folks, and they are supposed to answer this utterance through their actions against the Dalit communities of India. If the others can oppress the Dalit why can't the Tribals follow suit? This is how the dominant culture spreads its own value-system and validates its existence.

Another case of female and her word being silenced can be seen in *Bhilo nu Bharatha*, there is an incident in it where King Vasuki ties Arjun with just one strand of his moustache, and then proceeds to enjoy sex with Draupadi in his very presence, it is mentioned that Arjun does not disown Draupadi just because she is no longer pure, but accepts her the way she is. Dr. Bhagwandas Patel writes "Here we see that Arjun does not feel that his wife has become impure even though she has been ravaged in his very presence"(Patel 62). Dr. Patel insists that it is due to the respect given to female sexuality. On the other hand Draupadi attempts to resist the ravager only by trying to run away from the unwelcome visitor, when he first enters her chambers, and once he does so she meekly follows all his orders from heating water for his bath and to cooking a thirty-two course meal and preparing a fragrant and comfortable bed for him. Draupadi is shown to willingly participate in the act of love-making with Vasuki, reaching all the highs and lows of the process, and then in the morning after Vasuki releases Arjun she is shown to be taking care of the physically and emotionally hurt Arjun. She seeks Karna's help in getting rid of Vasuki because no one else but Karna the son of the Sun God can destroy the mighty Vasuki. This story finds no place in Muni Vyas's *Mahabharata*. So one wonders what is the relevance of this story in *Bhilo nu Bharatha*? Generally Tribal women are not considered as weak, or a sexually exploited lot. Though it is changing in the contemporary world, as everybody, right from the contractor to the builder, is sexually exploiting many Tribal women laborers. The reasons behind this exploitation are many, and the matter of great concern, but this is not the place to discuss them maybe in some other time and space. The most troubling thing about the whole story is the reaction of Draupadi, why is she silent in the face of such great humiliation and apparent rape. Can we read the liberation of female sexuality and its acceptance in this case? She wants it and so she does it?

In Bakhtinian terms let's look into the issue of "Addressivity" and "Answerability" of this particular tale. As it is a folktale it is necessarily an orally transmitted one, so it is directly addressed to an audience, and the audience answers by accepting the narration without any prejudice or pre-conceived notions. The Tribal audience does not contest the authenticity of the said narrative and accepts it as it is. Female sexuality and its expression is not taboo in their culture so Draupadi's actions are not improbable, at least for them. But if we look at it from the point of view of Heteroglossia then the outside world which has grown up on the staple diet of Vyas's *Mahabharata* and Tulsi Das's *Ramayana* will definitely be scandalized by this twist in the tale and out rightly reject it.

The tale of this very famous woman will be looked as an attempt to play with the honor of an entire nation. The word woman has so many religious, social, and political meanings that it becomes a word loaded with a variety of meaning. Women are not just female mammals, but necessarily have to be somebody's daughter, sister, wife or mother in order to exist. Women are defined through their relationship with men. Women have to fall into one category or other to even be acknowledged, if they do not fall into one of the criterion laid down by the society then they cease to exist. And all those women who are not officially related to some men are free for us by one and all. Keeping in view these social and political definitions of a woman in India, where does one place a woman who not only has five husbands but also willingly enters into an extra-marital relationship and enjoys sex outside marriage? She definitely is an outcast, right? But that is not the case in the Tribal world. Women of the Tribal world are free to express their sexuality as openly and instinctively as men.

There is one more interesting folktale involving women which is called *Narada Muni and Satihasya*. It is a story about female envy and revenge. Three women, namely, Anjani- Brahma's wife, Laxmi- Vishnu's wife,

and Parvati- Mahadev's wife, invite Narada Muni for lunch separately and prepare a sumptuous meal for him. He eats happily but instead of thanking them for the meal and appreciating their efforts he praises another woman named Satihasya. She is wife of a Rishi. All three Goddesses are enraged and send their husbands to take revenge on Satihasya, they are specifically told to violate her modesty. Satihasya turns them all into infants and then she breast-feeds them. It is only after the intervention and apologies from their wives and Narada Muni does she free them from her curse.

In this story the women are enraged because they are not appreciated by a man, then why do they get angry with another woman who has no role to play in their insult? Why is she blamed? But that's the power of the word. Why do these women seek appreciation? Why not take revenge on the man who insults them? The answers to these questions could be found by studying the non-Tribal influence on these utterances. Holquist writes, "Dialogism, like relativity, takes it for granted that nothing can be perceived except against the perspective of something else: dialogism's master assumption is that there is no figure without a ground" (Holquist 22). So in this story whose ground are we standing on, while evaluating the story, the Tribal or the non-Tribal one? Because the kind of revenge we see here is not a part of the Tribal culture, then where did it come from? Some of the mythical stories that we encounter in the Tribal oral tradition are taken from the non-Tribal myths. So if these utterances are borrowed then maybe they have brought along with them a new set of value-system. In the Tribal retelling it seems they might have added something of their own and deducted some. In the story about Draupadi it was an entirely new dimension added to the popular tale, while in this story the original elements might have been retained. What sort of response was expected from the Tribal audience is a matter of interpretation. Bakhtin stresses the importance of the audience to no avail. He writes,

But the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communication...But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence. It is actually created. As we know, the role of the *others* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great.... From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response (Bakhtin 1986).

From the above quotation we can understand the importance Bakhtin gave to the role of the listener. So when the Tribal narrator speaks the audience that mostly comprises of Tribals reacts in the way expected of them. Maybe both in Draupadi's tale and in this one they were looking at the women from the "other" culture and so found it convenient to devalue them, laugh at their meanness and littleness. Maybe the Tribals accepted the humanness of all our deities and mythological figures, and so they were also more accommodating of their weaknesses. Whatever the reasons but the Tribals as both speaker and listener have curious role to play in understanding a culture alien to them. The intention of the Tribals in editing the myths could also be a product of Heteroglossia. As Bakhtin says,

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated-overpopulated-with the intentions of others. Expropriating I, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process....As a living socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other....The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word, does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's context, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, make it one's own (Bakhtin 1992).

It is this process of making the outside story their own, that makes the Tribal literature extremely Bakhtinian. They have adapted and improvised the existing material and made a collage of tales that help them understand themselves and the non-Tribal world in a better light. The time, space and value which the Tribals give to their tales is very different from the way in which their tales are evaluated by the outside world. The

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non-Tribal value system is very different from that of the Tribals so for them to understand the true value of the Tribal culture is a mammoth task involving decentering and deconstruction of all that they have considered sacred in their critical evaluation. There is a sea of Tribal gems in their oral tradition that can be interpreted and re-interpreted using many modern critical theories in addition to Bakhtin.

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