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MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND DISCOURSE ON GENRE NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

In Western tradition, Socrates frequently employed a method of dialogue in argumentation, which allowed dramatic clash of juxtaposed points of view punctuated by the final word of a single person (interlocutor); and that mode of interaction came to acquire after him the name "Socratic dialogue". His disciple Plato further developed this many-voiced mode in writing, also known as Platonic dialogue; the master piece of which we have in the *Republic*, manifesting outstanding success of the mode. The ancient practice attracted the attention of Russian formalist and genre theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, and he used the concept while theorizing his views on the stylistic mode of the new novelistic (artistic-prose) genres vis-à-vis high poetic genres (epic, dramatic, lyric). Bakhtin located in the Socratic dialogues one of the earliest forms of what he termed variously in the novel: heteroglossia and dialogism. Kristeva is later believed to have rechristened these antecedent concepts as intertextuality (Worton & Judith Still 3).

The basic property of any discourse Bakhtin locates in dialogic orientation. He perceives dialogism as pervading not only the internal dialogism of the word, but stretching beyond to cover the entire compositional structure of a discourse (Leitch 1091).

**Key Words:** Monologic, monologism, dialogism, dialogic, dialogized, heteroglossia, heteroglottal, the unified speaking subject, multiform, variform, inserted genres, verbal ideological world, centripetal and centrifugal forces, polyglot consciousness, textual Carnival, external / internal polyglossia, interillumination, heroized, valorized, openedness, indecision, indeterminacy, chronotope, transposition, textual carnival.

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Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1897-1975) is one of the key figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism. He is acknowledged to have developed in the midst of his obscurity in Soviet Russia his views on the genre novel and a couple of related concepts that come to dominate the literary theory in the West around the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As per Leitch almost "everything about Bakhtin's life and writing is coloured by the fact that his greatest period of productivity coincided with the Russian Revolution, the ensuing civil war (1918-21), and the repressive Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin" (1072). During that period until Stalin's death in 1953, Bakhtin largely remained unknown. His literary eminence gradually rises thereafter, although his health shows symptoms of decay.

Todorov and Julia Kristeva, duly supported by Roland Barthes, brought Bakhtin's work to the limelight of the Western academy in the beginning of the 1970s; and ever since his discovery he "has been acclaimed by literary critics across wide theoretical and political spectrum. He has been called a formalist, a Marxist, a Christian humanist, a conservative, and a radical: because his work . . . resists easy classification" (Leitch 1072).

Lane writes that the publication of English translation of Bakhtin's key early works in 1990 further paves the way for his reception and adaptation in Western academy. Bakhtin's dissertation was translated into English bearing the title *Rebels and His World* in 1968, and thereafter *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), translated in 1981, and six essays including *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* in 1986; and as per Lane's observation, it is "through these essays that innovative Bakhtinian terms and concepts entered Western critical discourse" (11).

In his theory of novel Bakhtin discards the new structural linguistics (of the followers of Saussure), which subscribes to the view of a unitary system of language, in which a literary discourse is conceived as controlled by the author as an individual and his voice as a single authentic voice. Bakhtin holds this 'monologic' view of language as inadequate to analyse the dynamics of the novelistic discourse. For adequate study of the genre novel he underscores the need of a "Sociological stylistics", which can simultaneously address "the daily ideological activities of social life" and fundamental dialogism and heteroglossia of living language (Leitch 1073-74) in literary and non-literary discourses.

In his earlier formulation from 1919 to 1923 Bakhtin visualizes art and life as unified in subject. The unified subject is the space where the two realms of art and life get interpenetrated and so connected with each other in terms of a dialogic (or double-voiced) relationship, although "human being usually keeps these two modes of being separate" (Lane 10).

In the background of the above arguments the present paper concerns a brief reflection as well as a recapitulation on the two key texts "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35) and "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (tr. 1981), respectively, and the discussion of language and discourse in literature hereinafter revolves around them underscoring a couple of key terms/concepts.

"Discourse in the Novel". According to Bakhtin any discourse fundamentally lives in social modes (Bakhtin cited in Leitch 1076). The basic distinctive features of the novel as a genre as opposed to high poetic genres are outlined as under:

**The monologism of poetry or poetic discourse.** The poetic genres or artistic genres (epic, dramatic and lyric) orient towards the single language and single genres (*Ibid.* 1081). Their monologism depends upon normative centralizing system of a unitary language (1085). The traditional concept of poetic discourse allows only two poles in the life of language: (i) the system of a *unitary language* and the *individual* speaking subject in this language (1084). A system of linguistic norms govern a common unitary language befitting it for "an expression of the centripetal forces of language" (1084), and in the process what the readers are offered is a unified and centralized verbal ideological worlds, which tend to suppress and even overcome the inherent heteroglossia of language. Such situation accentuates the great centralizing tendencies of European verbal ideological life (1087).

**The dialogics of the novel/novelistic discourse.** The stylistic uniqueness is seen in the novelistic (artistic-prose) discourse. It favours "multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (1078), which fit in the requirements of living heteroglossia and dialogism of novelistic discourse. It concerns several heterogenous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and conditioned by different stylistic controls. The language of the novel is the system of its "languages" (1078). The novel demonstrates a diversity

of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, organized artistically (1078). Some of the fundamental compositional unities of the genre novel are authorial speech (the novelist's individual dialect, that is, his vocabulary, his syntax), the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters, and so on, which components combine to make possible the novelistic discourse, a social heteroglossal discourse (1079), thereby mixing a multiplicity of social voices. Consequently, the novel is (always something more or less) dialogized owing to its distinctive links and inter relationships between utterances and languages. The novel presents the distinctive social dialogue among languages by combining languages and styles into a higher unity (1079).

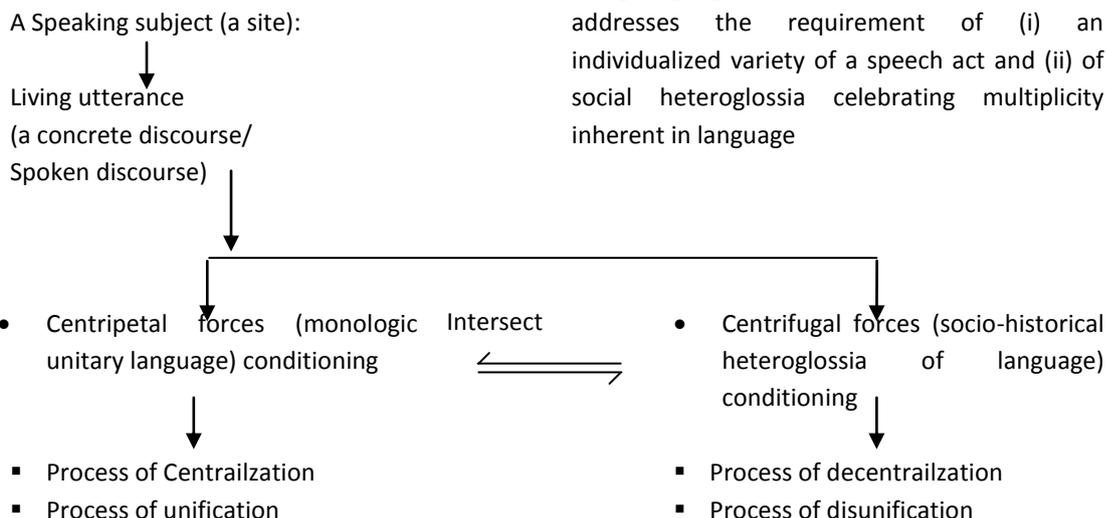
Eventually, a novelistic discourse is an artistic whole, its construction involves combining various elements that are heteroglossal, "multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-linguaged" (1080). Such discourse foregrounds the fact that every common unitary language at every moment of its linguistic life has to encounter opposition or resistance by the realities of heteroglossia (1084); the verbal ideological world is, therefore, subject to centrifugal forces of language, which focus on language plurality. In other words, "the centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a 'unitary language', operate in the midst of heteroglossia". (1085)

Moreover, a novelistic discourse "participate[s] in actual heteroglossia and multi-linguagedness" and in its vision tend towards "the decentralizing tendencies in the life of language by manifesting "polyglot consciousness" (1087). Language is a stratified system; its various strata comprise linguistic dialects, socio-ideological languages, such as languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations, and so on (1085). Viewed from this angle, literary language is one of the variants of any heteroglossal language.

Literary language is, in its turn, also stratified into variant languages : generic, period-bound and others. Stratification and heteroglossia is, on the one hand, a static invariant of linguistic life and, on the other, they ensure its dynamics. Further, the characteristics of stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing (1085). According to Bakhtin, in a couple of authors such as Grimmelshausen (German), Cervantes (Spanish), Rabelais (French) and Fielding, Smollette and Sterne (all English) and many others we have profound models of novelistic prose, which present a contradictory and multi-linguaged world of dialogic orientation (1087).

Curiously enough, in all discursive phenomena we encounter "alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go, forward" (1085) in a complex, trans-linguistic "socio-poetics" as propounded by Bakhtin. In the light of Bakhtin's theory of genre novel the discursive phenomena may be visualized diagrammatically as under:

**Two embattled tendencies in the discursive life of living languages and discourse in literature**



- concrete utterance as language and filled with specific content, and accented as individualized

The internal dialogization of discourse is artificially extinguished in poetic discourse, in favour of monologically sealed of utterance (1103)

Homogeneous, the authoritative control of the author or the authority of a single voice

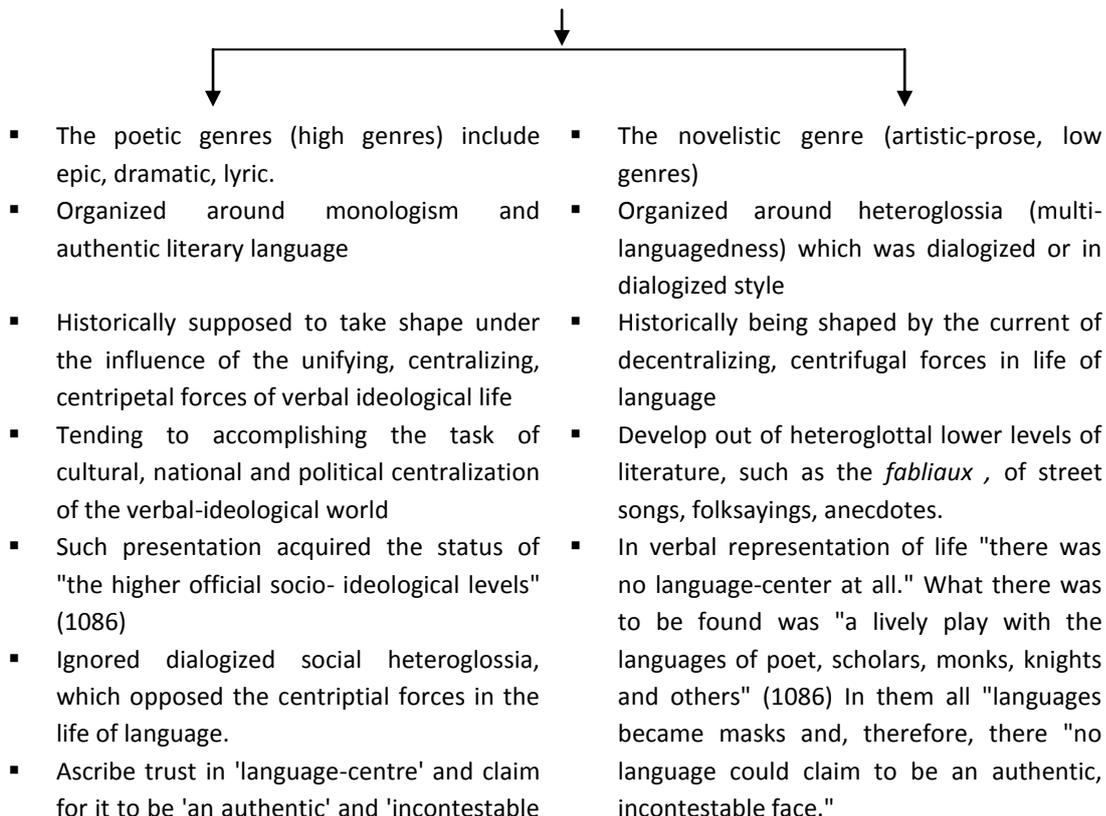
- Process of stratification
- Orientation towards primordial dialogism of discourse by visualizing language as something social, anonymous and heteroglottal
- Admits play of hetero-as well as polyglot socio-verbal consciousness, perceiving language as presenting "a concrete heteroglot conception of the world" (1101)
- The dialogic or polyphonic form of discourse allows characters to speak 'in their own voices' promoting plurality of voices and consciousness

(Leitch. *The Norton Anthology* 1101, 03 *et passim*.)

At this juncture, we need to recall that Bakhtin school represents the later phase of formalism. Its three leading figures are Mikhail Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin voloshinov. As against formal-orientation and Saussurean linguistic bias of predecessors, Bakhtinian school attempts to harmonize formalism (formal linguistic analysis) and Marxism (sociological emphasis) and, thus, foreground a dialogized, heteroglottal and carnivalesque view of language and discourse, which constitute "the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre (Leitch 1106). The table below show cases the :

**Synoptic view of development of genres/aspects of discourses & connected phenomena/vision as presented by Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel"**

**Two broad categories of discourses: the poetic and the novelistic**



face'.

- The traditional stylistics consider a literary work a hermetic and self-sufficient whole (1086), whose elements constitute a closed system or a kind of closed authorial monologue.
- The stylistic category classed as 'poetic' tends towards 'the monologic context of a given self-sufficient and hermetic utterance . . . obliged to exhaust itself in its own single context' (1086-87)
- Novelistic discourse as literary work seen as an open ended system comprising variant utterances, which subverts and stand in a dialogic interrelationship with other languages.
- Whereas, the novelistic discourse offers a 'dialogized style', which style is categorized as 'rhetorical', manifesting the polemical, the parodic, the ironic as its most marked characteristics.

(Leitch, *The Norton Anthology*, 1086, 87, 1103 et passim)

In the essay "Epic and Novel" Bakhtin articulates his views on language and discourse in literature and underscores, in particular, the dialogic, polyphonic and carnivalesque elements as the distinctive features of the genre novel. Bakhtin points out that in Aristotle, Horace and Boileau's organic poetics of the past we have prescribed norms for all genres in 'high' literature and they are given canonical stature within the idea of wholeness of literature (Bakhtin cited in Doaba in Emerson & Holquist tr. 43). In the ancient tradition the novel is excluded to become part of the canonical, organic whole of high genres. Bakhtin observes that "in ancient times the novel could not really develop all its potential; this potential came to light only in modern times" (*Ibid.* 63).

Bakhtin enumerates peculiar difficulties that one encounters in the study of the novel as a genre. He notes that novel as a genre shows a continuous as well as uncompleted development, and subsequently the "generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities" (*Ibid.* 42). In such a situation, the novel is denied a generic canon of its own. Bakhtin notices that while ancient major genre epic and even tragedy have "long since completed its development" and "already antiquated", the genre novel continues to developed its unforeseen plastic possibilities owing to its "flexible skeleton" (*Ibid.*).

He sees novel as fighting "for its own hegemony in literature", and has to have "an unofficial existence", outside "high literature" of the ruling social groups, in which all such genres "harmoniously reinforce each other to a significant extent the whole of literature, conceived as a totality of genres . . ." (*Ibid.* 43). This happens particularly in certain eras, such as the Greek classical period, the Augustan period of Roman literature and the neoclassical period (*Ibid.*).

Bakhtin holds that it is in the "scholarly poetics of the nineteenth century" that novel comes to be simply added to already existing genres. The second half of the eighteenth century represent "an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized". The impact of novel's ascendancy to become the dominant genre is seen in that hitherto "conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begins to sound in new ways, which are quite different from the ways they sounded in those eras when the novel was *not* included in the 'high' literature'. It is a peculiar feature of the phenomenon of novelization that in "the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres; it infests them with its spirit of process and inclusiveness" (*Ibid.* 43-44).

Bakhtin points out that Aristotle's Poetics which provides stable foundation for the theory of all genres in 'high' literature proves inadequate when it comes "to deal with the novel". It fails to deal with "novelized genres" and lays bare the need of "re-structuring" of the theory of genres, which includes a "comprehensive formula for the novel as a genre", instead of adhering to the practice of confining its exercise on the mere cataloguing "of all variants on the novel" (*Ibid.* 45).

In the essay Bakhtin refers to some positive prerequisites of the novel as genre as propounded by Blankenburg and later on adopted by Hegel in his theory of novel. They are (i) the avoidance of that

'poeticalness' and 'literariness' that is supposed to be inherent in other genres, (ii) avoidance of epic heroization, (iii) the depiction of protagonist as a person who evolves, develops and learns from life and (iv) as against the ancient world of glorious, epical past to relate it to the reality of the contemporary world. These features in a way posit the novel to become "the dominant genre in contemporary literature (*Ibid.* 46).

Bakhtin attempts to formulate his genre theory of the novel with the fundamental premise that it is the "most fluid of genres", "a genre-in-the-making", therefore, he initiates his study focusing on "the basic structural characteristics" of the novel, which "determine the direction of its peculiar capacity for the change and of its influence and effect on the rest of literature" (*Ibid.* 46). According to him the "three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres" are (i) its multi-languaged consciousness which is connected with its stylistic three-dimensionality; (ii) the noticeable change which it effects in the temporal co-ordinates of the literary image; and (iii) its opening of the new zone through structuring literary images, that ensures "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality in all its openendedness" (*Ibid.* 46-47).

To Bakhtin the stylistic peculiarity of the novel results from the fact the new world is actively polyglottal. "Polyglossia" is more ancient than pure, "canonic monoglossia", tragedy exemplifies "a polyglot genre". It is assumed that classical Greeks possessed a feeling both for "languages" and the epochs of language, non-the-less, in practice their "creative consciousness was realized in closed, pure language (although in actual fact they [Greek literary dialects] were mixed), polyglossia was appropriated and canonized among all the genres" (*Ibid.* 47).

Bakhtin holds that "The new cultural and creative consciousness", virtually "lives in an actively polyglot world" (47). Languages, in a polyglot world, throw light on each other subject to the process of "interillumination". In such a phenomena both external and internal illumination tend to condition words and language and they begin "to have a different feel to them; objectively they cease to be what they had once been" (47). In linguistic composition (such as vocabulary, phonology and morphology) each given language may in appearance remain unchanged, yet in reality it is reborn by "becoming qualitatively a different thing for the consciousness" (that is, human subject), that creates in it (47).

Bakhtin perceives completely new relationships getting established between language and its objective referent, the real world of the living present or contemporaneity. Unlike the already developed major genres of classical antiquity, the emergence and maturation of the novel occur precisely "when intense activation of external and internal polyglossia" reach at the peak of its activity (47). In other words, Bakhtin marks the difference between epic discourse and novelistic discourse like this: "In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries"; whereas in the discourse of the novel to "portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries . . . is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of epic into the world of the novel (48); which represent "contemporaneity" a reality of the "lower" order in comparison with the epic past (52).

The 'heroized' epic world of inherited and distanced past is erected on *valorized* temporal categories, as per Bakhtin, and he sees epic material "transposed into novelistic material precisely into that zone of contact that passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter"; and this is not allowed in epic discourse, as "there is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (49). As against novel, the other already completed high genres of classical antiquity and middle age, more or less, imbibe some fundamental characteristics of the antiquated epic genre (50).

In popular laughter of the ancient "serio-comical" genres, Bakhtin seeks the authentic folklorist roots, which later get further developed into "novelistic language" and the "novelistic genre", and this generate "a fundamentally new attitude toward language and toward the world" (52). The instances of the ancient, serio-comical are: the bucolic poems, the fable, the "Socratic dialogues" (as a genre), Roman satire of Lucilius, Horace, Persius and Juvenal, Menippean satire (as a genre) and Lucianic dialogues. These genres have the common comical origin, as they derive from folklore (popular laughter). Bakhtin underscores the point that it

"is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroy any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance" (53). Such dialogic forms hold mirror onto "the socially varied and heteroglot world of contemporary life" (55).

In a sense the Socratic dialogue furnishes ancient example of carnivalesque. In Socratic dialogue what appears to be logical is made to stand on its head and shown to be illogical through subversion and inversion. In it what is authoritative is subverted and its alternative substituted. About the Socratic dialogues which furnished "a new artistic-prose model for the novel" Bakhtin writes:

. . . the fact that a speaking and conversing man is the central image of the genre characteristic . . . is the combination of the image of Socrates, the central hero of the genre, wearing the popular mask of a bewildered fool . . . with the image of a wise man of the most elevated sort . . . ; this combination produces the ambivalent image of wise ignorance . . . . Around this image, carnivalized legends spring up . . . ; the hero turns into a jester . . . (54).

In the discourse of novel, Bakhtin sees a new way of conceptualizing time or "chronotope". In his writing "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-38), Bakhtin innovates the term "chronotope" to refer to that "intrinsic connectedness of time and space", which is supposed to play the "central role in constituting literary genres" (Leitch 1073). As against the 'then and there' of Epic discourse (comprising the image of the absolute, distanced past), in the discourse of the novel a reader encounters "the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present day reality" (62), which implies that it deals with the contemporaneity of 'here and now'. A novelistic discourse, therefore, generates in us "an interest in the present, a reality that was contemporaneous, showing closer proximity and kinship to the future than to the past" (62).

It is to be noted that a verbal discourse for Bakhtin is a social phenomenon and in a literary discourse 'form' and 'content' virtually form a unity. He, therefore, criticizes Russian Formalism arguing that because of its form-centered bias it fails to do adequate analysis of the 'content' of literature along socio-historical concerns/line. He criticizes Saussure's structural linguistics for its pure linguistic bias towards both language and literature. About the dialogic (many-voiced) nature of language Bakhtin makes a significant statement in his later published essay "Speech Genres and Other Late Essays" that "Quests for my own words are quests for a word that is not my own" (Leitch 1072).

About 'carnival', one of the key concepts of Bakhtin, Lane writes that this concept initially occurs in his essay "Rabelais and His World" concerning a study of the writings of Francois Rabelais (1494-1553). There 'carnival' is used as "a subversive force most clearly visible in the laughter and bodily humour of folk culture, in particular the pageants and carnivals of the Middle Ages which, Bakhtin argues, continue in transposed form in literary texts" (Lane 11).

A 'carnival' was originally a feast observed by Roman Catholics every year before the Lenten fast began in March. Like the Spanish *fiesta* it offered an occasion of feasting, entertainment and merrymaking. Carnivals in the Middle Ages symbolized relaxation of power and authority (both of Church and State). In a sense, it was a turning upside-down of the established hierarchical scale embodying disruption and subversion of authority, which is exemplified in the revels of the Feast of Fools, the Abbot of Misrule, the Boy Bishop, and so on; and these shows are put on the stage for public entertainment. Carnival feast is even today popular in Latin America, the Philippines and also Goa in India.

Cuddon argues that Bakhtin in his book *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics* (1929) develops "the idea of the carnivalesque in making a contrast between the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevski. In Tolstoy's fiction he sees a type of 'monologic' novel where all is subject to the author's controlling purpose and hand". As against this "Dostoevski's fiction is 'dialogic' or 'polyphonic', in which we encounter "many different character express varying, independent views which are not 'controlled' by the author to represent the author's view point" (Cuddon 111-12). In Bakhtin's words Dostoevsky's character are liberated to speak "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices . . ." (Bakhtin cited in Cuddon 219), and hence they are not subject to the authorial control.

Bakhtin sees the dialogic or polyphonic form "as a kind of dynamic and liberating influence which, as it were, conceptualizes reality, giving freedom to the individual character and subverting the type of 'monologic' discourse characteristic of many 19<sup>th</sup> c. novelists (including Tolstoy)" (Cuddon 112).

Bakhtin sums up the essay by underscoring the fact that ever since its inception "novel was made of different clay", and "it is a different breed". For Bakhtin the genre novel stands for 'flexibility' itself, and consequently he sees that the "process of the novel's development has not yet come to an end" and that "with it and in it is born the future of all literature", as it shows "closer proximity and kinship to the future than to the past" (62).

The discussion on Bakhtin may be concluded with Peter Barry's befitting remarks in his book's introduction:

Bakhtin admires the way the literary text is never 'univocal' (single-voiced) but generates a riotous plurality of meanings. He sees this as being especially so of the novel, which for him is characterized by its 'heteroglossia' (the word means 'different tongues') whereby the text provides us with a dialogue or carnival of many different voices, some ironic, some humorous, some self-mocking or self-parodying. Within this textual carnival there can be no place for the reasoned, authoritative, single voice to silence all others and impose a fixed and reliable version of the events depicted, for the text is by nature anarchic rather than authoritarian.(17)

Bakhtin views on language and literary discourse stand relevant even today and "widely advocated by cultural studies scholars", because his views "promote a complex sociopoetics suited to a contemporary globalized world of diverse peoples, languages, and cultural forms" (Leitch 1074).

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