Exploring the Bakhtinian Framework for Interpreting Literary Narratives

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Abstract

The present paper investigates how the Bhaktinian framework might be used to analyze literarynarratives and texts.The potential of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnivalization to reveal the multifarious complexity of literature is investigated. The paper aimsto demonstrate how the Bhaktinian framework can be used to uncover hidden meanings and reveal the intricacy of literary texts through an analysis of numerous literary works. The implications of this framework for literary criticism, interpretation, and analysis are discussed. The paper concludes with an assessment of the potential of the Bhaktinian framework to providea useful tool for literary interpretation.

Keywords: Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Chronotope, Polyphony, Carnivalesque, Discourse etc…

The Bakhtinian framework is a powerful mechanism for deciphering literary narratives. Itis an interdisciplinary approach that attracts a range of theories and concepts from linguistics, philosophy, and literary criticism. This framework, developed by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, provides a comprehensive model for examining the structure, form, and content of literary works. By using the Bakhtinian framework, one can explore how a given narrative isconstructed, how it is read, and how it is interpreted.

Mikhail Bakhtin is one of the most influential literary theorists of the twentieth century, widely considered the most important Soviet thinker in the social sciences. He wrote extensivelyon the topics of aesthetics, poetics, and linguistics. His most influential works include *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965). He is credited with establishing the literary genre of "dialogic writing" and is considered one of the most important theorists of the 20th century. Born in 1895 in Vilnius, the son of a bank manager, Bakhtin's family later moved to Odessa, where he enrolled at the University of Petrograd in 1914. During the civil war of 1918-1920, Bakhtin worked as a school teacher in Nevel, in western Russia, and in 1924 he returned to Leningrad after a formative period in Vitebsk, where he developed his ideas alongside those of figures such as Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev. Shortly beforepublishing his first prominent work, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, he was arrested in 1929 for suspected links to underground members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Bakhtin's ten-year prison sentence to the Solvesky Islands was commuted to a six-year exile in Kostanay, Kazakhstan, which he servedwith his wife. He was prohibited from teaching, so he turned to book keeping in the cooperative of thecollectivized system. Concurrently, he wrote his lengthy work "Discourse in the Novel". With the assistance of Pavel Medvedev, a comrade and participant of the same circle, Bakhtin was chosen for a teaching role at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute, which

was 400km away fromMoscow. However, Stalin's Great Purge and the crackdown of the secret police on ex-prisoners and deportees in 1937, caused Bakhtin and his wife to escape to Savelovo, located 100 km fromMoscow. His right leg had to be amputated as a result of the severe pains he was suffering from.Nonetheless, the political situation was beginning to relax, resulting in his call to lecture at the Gorky Institute of World Literature (which was a part of the Soviet Academy of Sciences) in 1941.

At this time, Bakhtin wrote most of his works, which were later translated and publishedinto English as *The Dialogic Imagination*. Additionally, he submitted a doctoral dissertation to the Gorky Institute, which was later translated into English as Rabelais and His World. Unfortunately, the war prevented him from defending it. After the war, Bakhtin was appointed chair of the Department of General Literature and promoted to docent at Saransk. On November15th, 1946, his dissertation defence occurred; however, it was strongly debated for more than seven hours by the committee due to its controversial subject matter. A second defence happenedon May 9th, 1947 and it wasn't until June of 1951 that he was granted a candidate's degree, a lesser degree than the doctorate. Bakhtin remained in Saransk until his retirement in 1961.

For over a century, intellectuals across different fields have been challenging the notion of hierarchical paradigms of knowledge and language, and have been seeking out more progressive alternatives to navigate them in their work. In recent decades, this questioning of traditional beliefs has become increasingly prevalent. In doing so, Bakhtin's ideas, with its socially oriented focus on language and the construction of meaning have come to the attentionof scholars in many different fields. His original concepts have widened both theoretical and empirical approaches in a wide range of scientific fields. These include most notably anthropology, art, education, economy, gender studies, history, linguistics, literature, pedagogy, philosoph, political science, psychoanalysis, sociology and theatre. The range of depth of Bakhtin's ideas present an opportunity to look not just one aspect of the readers, writer, or test, but it weave these ideas together into a more comprehensive perspective of reading

Bakhtin is known for having presented groundbreaking concepts in the world of literary theory. His earlier works are seen as precursors of current structuralist and poststructuralist thought. Bakhtin also challenged Russian Formalism's essentialist method of looking at literature, instead proposing a sociological materialist approach. In Marxism and the Philosophyof Language, he elaborated on his socio-historical theory of language, disagreeing with Ferdinand de Saussure's bio-physiological linguistics. His critique of Freudian psychoanalysis from a Marxist standpoint is found in Freudianism: A Marxist Critique. In his later works, Bakhtin expanded his socio-historical ideas—later known as "Heteroglossia"—to cover not onlylinguistics but also literature.

The book *The Dialogic Imagination* provides Bakhtin's insights on the novel, including his ideas on language theory, particularly in the essay "Discourse in the Novel". Furthermore, Bakhtin's Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics explains his concept of polyphony and dialogism. Bakhtin thought that Dostoevsky wrote in a way that allowed each character to express their voice without being influenced by the author's opinions. This idea of "dialogism" is extensively explored in many of Bakhtin's literary and cultural theories. *In Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explored

medieval and Renaissance European culture by studying François Rabelais's Gargantuaand Pantagruel. He argued that the 'carnival' and 'culture of laughter' of the era allowed the lowerclasses to make fun of official languages and notions of high culture, thus liberating and empowering them.

Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes the need of creating meanings in a dialogic way with otherpeople. His concept of dialogism states a relation among language, interaction, and social transformation. Bakhtin believes that the individual does not exist outside of dialogue. The concept of dialogue, itself, establishes the existence of the "other" person. It is through dialoguethat the "other" cannot be silenced or excluded. Bakhtin states that meanings are created in processes of reflection between people. And these are the same meanings that we use in later conversations with others, where those meanings get amplified and even change as we acquire new meanings. In this sense, Bakhtin states that every time we talk about something or we discuss about something that we have gone through , read about, seen or felt; we are reflecting on the dialogues we have had with others, showing the meanings that we have created in previous dialogues. This is, what is said cannot be separated from the perspectives of others: the individual speech and the collective one are deeply related. Itis in this sense that Bakhtin talks about a chain of dialogues, to point out that every dialogue results from a previous one and, at the same time, every new dialogue is going to be present in future ones. In his work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin contrasts the dialogic and the "monologic" work of literature. The dialogic work carries on a continual dialogue with otherworks of literature and other authors. It does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend aprevious work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work. Dialogic literatureis in communication with multiple works. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue extends in both directions, and the previous work of literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is.

The term 'dialogic' is not confined to literature, but extends to all language and thought,according to Bakhtin. All language is dynamic, relational and engaged in a continual process ofre-describing the world. He identified certain uses of language that maximize its dialogic capabilities, such as in novelistic discourse. This type of discourse invites the reader to identifywith the characters, typically reflecting regional, class and gender differences, in which groups are often shown to be in competition and conflict with one another. The novelization, for Bakhtin, is an all-encompassing phenomenon, embodying heteroglossia, polyphony, chronotype, intertextuality, and carnivalesque.

In *The Dialogical Imagination*, Bakhtin extends his analysis of dialogism through theconcept of *heteroglossia*. Bakhtin defines *heteroglossia* as a blending of world views throughlanguage that creates complex unity from a hybrid of utterances. Heteroglossia denotes the different strata (Social, professional, dialects, jargon etc) in the same language. Thus, heteroglossia is opposed to unitary language and what makes it unique is this diversity. In the novel, heteroglossia introduces a reorganization of all the levels of a language current at the timedescribed there. This analysis emphasizes that even within a single perspective, there are always multiple voices and perspectives because the language which is used has been borrowed from others. Bakhtin argues that this is not simply creativity by the author. He is highly critical of suchan emphasis on the author, which he sees as expressing a nomological view of the

novel. Rather,the author performs a particular syncretic expression of social heteroglossia.

Heteroglossia causes long-term linguistic and aesthetic changes. Bakhtin attaches enormous social power to literature, suggesting that entire worldviews are shaped by monological and dialogical types of literature. Epics and poetry create fatalistic and closed worlds, whereas novelscreate open worlds.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin developed the concepts which were to inform much of his work. The concept of 'polyphony' (borrowed from music) is central to thisanalysis. Polyphony means multiple voices. Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky's work as containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice ofthe author. Each of these voices has its perspective, its validity, and its narrative weight within the novel. The author does not place his narrative voice between the character and the reader, butrather, allows characters to shock and subvert. It is thus as if the books were written by multiple characters, not a single author's standpoint. Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author's voice, there is a plurality of consciousnesses, each with its world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character. Polyphony arises in fiction when the special position of the author allows great freedom of interaction with the characters. The characters in a polyphonic novel are allowed maximum freedom so that they could argue with each other and even with their author. That is, in polyphonic novels different centers of consciousness are allowed to interact on the plane of the novel.

The essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" develops not just a new interpretation of how the modern novel differs from earlier literary forms, but a whole method for understanding differences between genres. The 'Chronotope', Bakhtin states, is "the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature... Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (DI, 84). Bakhtin uses the chronotope to discuss the different ways in which literature—from the Greek romance to theEuropean novel—has used various temporal and spatial features to express a wide variety ofworld views. In each chronotope, a different image of a person, contextualized in a differentsense of history, society, and culture, is presented.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of humour, the comic, and the carnivalesque have made him a popularfigure in postmodern critical circles. By expanding the theory of carnival beyond a single folk

event and identifying the carnivalesque as a semiotic cultural code that signifies much more thansimply texts focused on medieval European popular tradition, Bakhtin's work demonstrates the potential for humour and parody of authority to act as a powerful form of social protest, allowingthe oppressed lower classes to provide a voice to their nonconformist and rebellious views.

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque emerges whenever an oppressive system begins to

weaken, enabling the decentralization of culture and thus threatening the established social order.Nevertheless, the carnival also offers an outlet for the expression of oppositional sentiments, thereby bringing about social harmony and peace.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical concepts offer a new perspective on how to read and decode literature, providing a lens to observe how the privileged and the marginalized interact with each other. For instance, Chronotope can be used to analyze how the physical and temporalsettings of a narrative are used to reinforce or challenge the existing power structures. Furthermore, dialogism can be used to examine how the discourse of the privileged is negotiated with the discourse of the marginalized. Polyphony and Carnivalesque can be used to explore howthe literature reflects and subverts the existing power dynamics, allowing us to gain a better understanding of our society as a whole. Ultimately, these theories provide a meaningful framework with which to analyze literature and create meaningful change.

To conclude, the Bhaktinian framework gives a perceptive and thorough method for comprehending how to analyze literary narratives. It offers a way to examine the various levels of meaning that can be found in literature. We can better grasp the literary text by focusing on thedialogic relationship between the author and reader as well as the socio-political environment in which a narrative is generated and perceived. In the end, we can use this framework to better

appreciate and comprehend the intricate and frequently contradictory meanings present in literary works. Bakhtin's ideas can be integrated into various sociological perspectives. His

consideration of literary criticism is profoundly shaped by sociological leanings. Bakhtin has amuch more complex and sophisticated social theory. He gives birth to an abstract, coherent andgreatly satisfying sociological theory that can be used to analyze any society. Thus, one can figure out the underpinning of social issues ingrained into the core of the theories propounded byhim.

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