A Critical Reading of Bakhtin's *Epic and Novel*

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Abstract:

This paper is deeply aimed at making a critical survey of Bakhtin's seminal essay *Epic and Novel* from his collected essays *The Dialogic Imagination* edited by Michel Holquist. For a critical engagement with Bakhtin dialogism; all the major terms like *heteroglossia, polyphony* and *chronotope* are also discussed in the proper contexts. Also to understand and appreciate Bakhtin more cogently, his ideas and propositions on novel has been discussed with the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukacs. The ideas as espoused by Bakhtin on the major genres of literary tradition are so greatly laden with critical insight that it feels perpetually relevant and important.

Key words: Dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony, stylistics, being, becoming

Despite the fact that Mikhail Mikhalovich Bakhtin has become an eminent and unavoidable figure in the literary-cultural discussions of the twentieth century, he has complications essentially unique. Some of the complications inhere in his times: his two most effective periods came into being in the morbid years of Russian history: the decade following 1917, when the country was staggering under the combined effects of a lost war, revolution, civil war and famine; and the following decade, the thirties, when Bakhtin was in exile in Kazakhstan for the publication of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (1929). It was in these crucial years that Bakhtin wrote something on the order of nine huge books on topics as varied as Freud, Marx and the philosophy of language.

In 1975, a collection of Bakhtin's major essays, delineating a historical poetics for the novel ,*Questions of Literature and Aesthetics* came out soon after his death. And as Michael Holquist, editor of the book *The Dialogic Imagination writes* that it is from this "the four essays in this volume are taken."

The immediate contribution these essays make is to the theory of the novel, as a particularly piqued area of literary scholarship and Bakhtin proves its veracity in relation with other major literary genres. What makes The Dialogic Imagination essentially distinctive is its complex scholarly fusion of Bakhtin's key concepts-*polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival* and of course *dialogism* itself.

Before casting light on Epic and Novel, it feels inevitable to discuss in brief Bakhtin's theoretical position on dialogue itself. For Bakhtin, dialogue (in the novel or in life) does not feature only in exchanges between 'relatively entire utterances'(i.e. between characters/individual speech acts) but, more profoundly, at the level of the individual word.

Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances; a dialogic approach is possible toward any signifying part of an utterance, even toward an individual word, if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position.

A further, important point to note from this is the *materiality* of Bakhtin's dialogic principle. Although born out of his literary-historical criticism (i.e. his work with literary texts), Bakhtinian dialogue is modelled on the conditions of everyday speech and language (in significant contrast, for example, to Derrida's concept of difference which is rooted in the slipperiness of the written word). One of the most striking, and memorable, of Bakhtin's own metaphors for the operation of dialogism is that of a 'bridge'; this bridge may be seen to connect not only the speaker and his or her interlocutor, but also individual words of speech which pass between them and become a 'shared territory.'

Locating dialogism within the individual word of speech or writing in this way led Bakhtin to develop in *The Dialogic Imagination*- a complex typology of novelistic discourse.

The distinctiveness of Bakhtin lies in his prudent delineation of "the novel as new", something still in the process of becoming. In this context the obvious name that comes to mind is the Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs who too in his *Theory of the Novel* (1920) talks emphatically about "becoming" and "being". However in Lukacs there is a tone of pessimism that laments over the loss of an epic totality that was "transcendentally immanent" but Bakhtin beside the loss adds the indispensible functions of the novel in a more positive light. Secondly, Lukacs takes up more a "historicio-philosophical" paradigm whereas Bakhtin is more conscious about the sets of language that work as the dividing criteria. And here comes his much discussed idea of "heteroglossia" at forefront.

Coming to the essays, the first one *Epic and Novel*, establishes the individuality of the novel in contrast to the epic. What comes out is a definition of novels as essentially suited to our post- lapsarian, post-industrial heteroglot civilization. The essay defines novel in its very epistemological function of genre inclusiveness that can include and devour other genres and still retain its status as a novel.

The second essay, *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse* outlines in a more pithy way how a number of disparate texts from the distant past finally comingled into the construction of the modern novel.

In the third essay, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, Bakhtin in another way defines the distinctiveness of the novel by means of its history, using different proportions of time-space projection as the unit for changes.

The fourth essay in *The Dialogic Imagination, Discourse in the Novel* is a comprehensive account of Bakhtin's philosophy of language.

At the very outset of Epic and Novel, Bakhtin asserts the still evolving position of the novel. The very emergence of the novel or in Bakhtin's phrase "the generic skeleton" is historically decipherable. And here he brings the epic into the purview to demonstrate it as something not only "completed" but has already been antiquated. The epics and the tragedies have already lived "with a hardened and no longer flexible skeleton." Hence from the very beginning Bakhtin presents before us two different worlds with their radical individual properties and he goes on expanding his discussion by keeping these two as locus. In fact, he makes it precisely clear that language is the unavoidable defining characteristics in the affair. While the language of the novel is alive and "still young"; epics and other genres share a language which is dead and lost. Henceforth dealing with the novel cannot be done in a general plane with other genre. On the contrary it demands distinct kind of a treatment and a separate theoretical formulae.

The reciprocal interaction of genres within a single unified organic whole in eras like the Greek Classical period, the Golden Age of Roman literature, the neo-Classical period does not fit into the paradigm of the novel. The novel for its own etymological functioning fails to participate in any harmony with other genres. While the other genres share a kind of common identity because of the sameness in the deep structure the novel for sure was left alone.

We can see in clear terms how all literature is caught up in the process of "becoming" in the eras largely dominated by the novel. For instance in the Anglophone world the second half of the eighteenth century, when the novels reigned supreme, all other genres started becoming "novelized" : in drama (Ibsen, Hauptman), epic poetry (*Child Harold* and Byron's *Don Juan*). These works even though strive hard to retain the canonic solidarity, yet appears to be stylized. And here comes his idea of parody. Interestingly, the uniqueness or rather in Bakhtin's phrase "the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres" becomes very much perceptible in these imitation of locus classicus.

Further, Bakhtin talks about the integral features, when such parodying/novelization takes place. The work becomes more flexible, it becomes dialogized, smeared with laughter, irony and humour. And most importantly it offers a wide range of semantic openendedness. The wide array of varied interpretation is the chief distinctive element of these works. This happens for this "novelization" has always an essential tone of contemporaneity in it, i.e.it is always attentive and conscious of the present reality in the most open way.

Bakhtin writes, as novel is the only genre which is in the process of becoming, "therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding." Therefore, unlike the fixed, immaculate and immutable projection of reality of the epic, the novel depicts a more fluid and complex picture of reality.

Bakhtin is also deeply conscious of the inadequacy of a coherent literary theory in constructing a theoretical framework for the novel. Even though sharing his space in the second half of the twentieth century it was so bold

on his part to claim that in the spectrum of genre discussion in literary theories, Aristotle has always been at the core. However this works until we don't bring the novel into light. And here he sharply writes that, "the existence of novelized genres already leads theory into a blind alley". Thus, after feeling this utter incongruence, Bakhtin is sure about a "radical re-structuring of genre theory."

In very clear terms, Bakhtin laid down the essential distinguishing characteristics of the novel: multi-languaged consciousness, the radical change it makes in coordinates of literary image and the zone of maximal contact with the present in all its openendedness.

All these three characteristics of the novel are inter illuminative and one generates the other like what Saussure writes for language as "self-genertive." Bakhtin also gives us the obvious reason for the emergence of the new genre. The ruptures in the history of Western civilization that gradually became socially isolated and culturally deaf made it possible.

We inevitably share a polyglot world as an aftermath of various socio-cultural influences. Bakhtin writes,"the world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly." Languages themselves become reciprocal and complementary and therefore need their analysis in relations. And it is from this intense play of polyglossia the petals of the novel start blooming. From this it is very much perceptible that it is the copious approach of the novel towards language in all its varieties that becomes the key factor in delineating reality.

Then Bakhtin shifts his focus into the epic, only to return to the novel again. In this context he puts forth three integral constitutive features of the epic and discusses them in detail; an "absolute-past" as the subject for the epic, national tradition serves the source for the epic, an absolute epic distance separates the world from contemporary reality.

In relation to the first feature we can say that the epic world is all about the "beginnings" or "peak times" in national history. It is a world of "firsts" and "bests." The readers and so with them the very authorial position (one who utters the epic world) is lifted up into a realm of inaccessibility; absolutely aloof from any contemporary touch. Both the singer and the listener are located in the same time and on the same evaluative plane, but this represented world of heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time and value plane. In other words the substance of the epic is so definite that, the readers and listeners are inevitably at some distant. They get an intense ethical awareness that any violation or interference in that world is utterly unpardonable.

However, Bakhtin is also conscious of the fact that one may conceive the present "my time" as heroic, epic time, by making it historically significant from some point in the future. But surely, that kind of a work will betray the "presentness of the present and the pastness of the past." Henceforth one ought not to ignore the time while estimating ay literary work. Here Bakhtin, like Lukacs claims an epic world as something circular and within that everything is absolute and completed. The Aristotelian idea of a beginning, middle and end does not necessarily

work here for the simple reason that even a smallest chunk of that world so profoundly indicates the substance that is timelessly good and perfect and in this process the portions of an epic are all equally significant.

Bakhtin further elucidates the basic impetus for the novel that are dialogues and satire. And in this context he cites how Fredrich Schlegel regards Socratic dialogues as "novels of their time" and the Menippean satire (*Satyricon* of Petronius). These serio-comical genres contributed immensely in the evolution of the novel. Bakhtin even proves the veracity of this view, that it is the touch of contemporaneity in these genres when the distance is gone and what becomes noticeable is a crude contact with everything real and palpable in the present. And here he makes its result amply clear that when one is solely ruled and motivated by the present, then it is laughter only that emerge out of it. And it is this laughter that proliferates this epic distance, because anything distanced an image or situation cannot be comical. It is only when the present is present in all its frankness then laughter is possible, when the distance between the subject and the objective world of representation is absolutely gone. Here Bakhtin writes, "Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity." The individual here meets with his variant selfhoods, and fragility. The form-giving intention of the writer evades the sacrosanctity of the epic essence.

The *Illiad* ends with Hector's burial and so it offers an absolutely finished impression to the reader. Because as Bakhtin views that in an epic world each part is a whole in itself and the whole is repeated in each part. But this never happens in the novel. The very mode of its writing infuses a profound sense of curiosity in the reader's heart and mind. This "impulse to continue" (what will happen next?) and the "impulse to end" (how will it end?) occurs only for the novel when maximal contact with the present is very much integral to it. Interestingly this idea of curiosity is very much perceptible when Georg Eliot writes in the opening sentence of her *Finale Middlemarch* that, "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending." This vividly implies that ending in a novel is very much of a constructed kind made only to satiate the psychological urge of the readers. But the canvas of life, in other words reality itself is so boundless that pages of a novel can hardly enwrite it in its entirety.

Towards conclusion Bakhtin writes, how the rupture between man for himself and man in the eyes of others which was an integral whole in the epic makes the preparatory steps for the achievement of higher human consciousness. In the novel the hero in his process of encountering with the larger world acquires new linguistic and ideological abilities to change his own image. In this context he brings number of heroes from classical age; Socrates, Epicurus, and the image of Menippius in Lucian.

 Henceforth, Bakhtin's approach in *Epic and Novel* is very much a cognitive one that profoundly provides a cogent theoretical formulae to the evolution of literary genres and elucidates their individual contradistinctive properties.

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