

DIALOGISM AND THE DRAMATIC GENRE: DECONSTRUCTING MIKCHAIL BAKHTIN'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of dialogism was propounded in the 1920s by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's (1895 - 1975) to explain the polyphonic nature of the novel which according to him goes with a dialogic imperative that distinguishes it as a "super-genre" when compared with the epic and poetry. Writing in Russia of Stalin's era, Bakhtin's work confronts the monologic voice of the epic which represents the ruling class and de-privileges its authority by empowering the suppressed voices in the society. As a subversive discourse, dialogism as Michael Holquist's remarks in his introductory comments to *The Dialogic Imagination*, has an "extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience" (xx). This suggests that human existence anchors on a multivocal approach to rationality.

Also fundamental to this theory is the modernist intellectual argument in the Soviet Union, particularly Russian formalism led by Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson. As David Lodge indicates, Russian formalism advocates "making the study of literature an exact science; an idea which featured in twentieth century thought through the Prague School, Structuralism and New criticism" (15). But Bakhtin sees a link between literature and history which is why he states categorically in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* that "True understanding in literature and literary scholarship is always historical and personified" (162). This insistence on the relationship between literature and history accounts for the tension generated by his conflict based theory because his works bring history under scrutiny.

Bakhtin's difficult career has produced major classics among which are: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, *Rabelias and His world*,

The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays among many others. But his intellectual freedom was stifled soon after the publication of the Dostoevsky's book in 1929; and so some of his works appeared with other names. The most important of them is *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* by V. N. Volosinov who happened to have been a prominent member of the first "Bakhtin's Circle" of scholars between 1919 and 1920 as Holquist reports (xii).

The Dostoevsky's book introduced the dialogic theory into the literary sphere, a concept which Bakhtin has popularised in subsequent texts. It is important to observe that dialogism is a theory of the novel which is applied in this work to the dramatic genre. In attempting to deconstruct Bakhtin's theory, we are not concerned with the rigorous textual explication of works which we find in the writings of post-structuralist critics such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. We shall, nevertheless, identify the "thread" that links this theory to drama as well as confront the power which sustains the hegemony of the novel over dialogism. This work therefore, is essentially a critique and an application of dialogism to the dramatic genre.

II BAKHTIN'S DIALOGISM AS A POETICS OF THE NOVEL

Making a case for the leadership of the novel as a mature genre in "Epic and the Novel", the first essay in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin describes the novel as a genre which stands "in the vanguard of all modern literary development" with three major characteristics: a multi-linguaged consciousness, radicality and open-endedness (11). The epic is used here to signify "the already completed genres "that has been formed during eras of" closed and dead monoglossia" (12). He explains further that:

Whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is a transferral of a word it describes to an absolute past... a specifically everlasting (hierarchical) category (15)

What this means is that the epic and poetry (which include drama) have an absolute voice which points to the past and resists any kind of incursion because of its preference for hierarchy.

This implies that the language of epic and poetry is idealized since it conveys authority while the novel uses the "unofficial" language that encompasses the suppressed voices in the social system. The "unofficial" language which by its nature is resistant to authority engages the former in an "ambivalent laughter" that is "at the same time cheerful and annihilating" (21). This, in Bakhtinian aesthetics is called carnival laughter and it is directed at the ruling class. The carnivalesque is the subject of *Rabelais and His World*, a product of Bakhtin's doctoral thesis which he was denied in 1946 by the Accrediting Bureau "because of the unconventional nature of that research" (Holquist XXV).

The carnivalesque is presented as a major prerogative of the novel which emanates from its "double-voicedness" or dialogization. In the glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination*, dialogism is defined as "the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia" (426). Heteroglossia "is the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance... all utterances are heteroglot in that they are function of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup and otherwise impossible to resolve" (428). This means that "unofficial" or ordinary language is used in context and has multiplicity of meanings because of the interaction among numerous voices in the society which is from the standpoint of conflict.

Although Bakhtin acknowledges the presence of heteroglossia in an official language such as rhetorical discourse, he however believes that it cannot express the individual viewpoints of ordinary people. In the last essay in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "Discourse in the Novel", he blames the epic's inability to embody

multiple viewpoints on the fact that "remaining as it does within the boundaries of a single language system, it is not fertilized by a deep-rooted connection with the forces of historical becoming that serve to stratify language" (325). And so, though there are different voices in the epic and poetry (including drama), they adopt a monologic voice because they belong to the hierarchical strata of the society.

This unwillingness of the epic and poetry to speak with many voices contrasts sharply with the novel which in Dale M. Bauer and Susan J. Mckinsty's interpretation of the dialogic theory "is always open, always changing, always discourse in process" (9). As such, the former genres are dead and closed languages whose only hope for social relevance lies in their "novelization", the process of making them resistant to authority. Consequently, Bakhtin insists that "Any stylistics capable of dealing with the distinctiveness of the novel as a genre must be a *sociological stylistics*" (Original Emphasis 300). Bakhtin's veneration of the novel implies that just as the "festive luxury" of the medieval man abolished social distinction, the folk represents a perspective that cannot be ignored.

III DECONSTRUCTING BAKHTIN'S THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE DRAMATIC GENRE

The preceding arguments have raised three major issues: the novel has a dialogic imperative which is absent in other genres because it is polyphonic in nature; the novel speaks the language of ordinary people; and it engages the different voices in the society in interactions which are always impossible to resolve because of the multiplicity of meanings. These issues will be used to examine our discussion of the poetics of drama; not as a hierarchical genre, but as a genre which Bernard Beckerman calls "a glutton"

because it "will swallow any kind of material and experience that can be turned into performance" (See Brockett's *The Essential Theatre* 2).

Bakhtin sees literary creations (whether poetry, drama or novel) as "utterances". The word "utterances" is from the Russian "Slovo" which is translated as word. In Bakhtinian aesthetics, utterance, discourse and language are used interchangeably although the first two are pre-dominant. This shows that every artistic creation is an utterance which is capable of producing other utterances in reaction to the initial discourse. The interaction between utterances (or voices), which Bakhtin calls "dialogization", re-relativises the utterances by engaging the different voices in a discursive struggle.

Dialogization in the novel, Bakhtin reveals, is a product of the interaction of "a diversity of individual voices... (264). Dialogue as a verbal process which is central to the dialogic theory, is also crucial for drama as Luigi Pirandello shows in this comment:

Dialogue in theatre is the language of the characters. If the playwright has created characters and placed men... on stage, each one of them will have a specific way of expressing himself. Then the Play when read will seem to have been written by More than one author, its dialogue made up in the Heat of action by the individual characters, not by their creator (155).

This demands that the playwright should give each character an independent existence because "every action in a play needs a free human personality if it is to appear alive and breathing before us" (155).

Oscar Brockett also gives a more detailed analysis of the relevance of dialogue to drama, particularly in relation to language use when he remarks that:

Language is the playwright's primary means of expression... the dramatist depends almost entirely on dialogue and stage directions. Thus, language (diction) is the

playwright's primary tool. Diction serves many purposes: It is used to impart information, to characterize, to direct attention to important plot elements, to reveal the themes and ideas of a play to establish tone or mood and internal logic and to establish tempo and rhythm... (Original Emphasis 47).

There is a living interplay between dialogue and diction on stage because they form part of the plot-structure. This readily explains why dialogue is more effective on stage than in a passive medium like the novel.

Incidentally, characters in the novel are cast as "passive instrument of an action", to use the words of Pirandello (155). But drama as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman attest "consists almost entirely of words spoken directly by the characters, that is dialogue, that the work can be read or that it can be seen in the form of stage presentation" (3). Yet, a greater proportion of this, experts agree stem from non-verbal aspects of communication; a position Malra Treece validates when she intimates that "non-verbal messages make up as much as 70 to 90 percent of the transfer of meaning and emotion in face-to-face interaction" (16). This inability of the novel to engage in live communication deflates its potency as a multi-voiced genre in relation to drama.

Being a major component of the theatre experience, drama consists of "action, which is the very spirit of acting: words, which are the body of the play: line and color which is the very essence of dance" (Craig 113). These elements of drama give dialogue on stage a high degree of reciprocity; and as such it accommodates diverse voices in the social system. This is the point Brockett is making in his reference to the four things Thornton Wider uses to distinguish theatre from other art forms, the novel inclusive. The theatre is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators;

It is addressed to the group-mind;

It is based upon a pretense and its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretenses;

Its action takes place in a perpetual present time (Emphasis Mine 17).

The above suggests that drama cannot be a monologic discourse because it is by nature multivocal.

One major reason why drama is more polyhonic than the novel is the fact that it is enacted before an audience. Frank Whiting explains this further when he states that "with the living actor and an intimate theatre, the sharing experience which is the essence of art, is heightened to a degree that is difficult to achieve in any mechanical media" (8). Again, Edwin Wilson supports this argument by identifying "the actor-audience relationship" as the distinguishing factor between theatre and film (15). This is also applicable to the novel.

Drama communicates primarily through human beings and so portrays men and women as they enact their roles in "the dramatic voices". This is why Wilson perceives theatre as:

...the dramatization of the story or its transformation into action and conversation (which is called dialogue), since ultimately everything on stage must be acted or spoken by a performer...so. Drama is a person-centered genre (149-50).

Indeed, the novel is not the only genre with the dialogic imperative; drama is the most dialogic of the genres.

Since dialogue as J. L. Styan shows in *Elements of Drama* is "a scaffolding inside which stage meanings are erected" (48); it cannot be seen as an exclusive attribute of the novel. The point raised by Styan is analyzed in this revealing statement by Wilson where he explains the relevance of dialogue to drama.

...the subject of theatre is always people and concerns. In grammar, every subject needs a verb, similarly, in theatre, dramatic characters need a verb-some form of action to define them (Original Emphasis 153).

It is for this reason that action which is enhanced through dialogue on stage imputes on drama a higher dialogic imperative, when compared to the novel.

Bakhtin uses the carnival festival in the Middle Ages in which the masses appropriate power to themselves to illustrate the futility of absolute power. Describing a 1789 Roman Carnival, Goethe observes that it is "not really a festival given for the people but one the people give themselves" because each person was free to participate as "both actor and speaker" (Docker 273). Their freedom is shown in a jamboree with poor people playing the roles of kings and kings serving as fools. This invasion is utilized in Rabelais and His World where Bakhtin examines the carnivalesque in Rabelais' sixteenth century novel, Gargantus and Pantagruel. This, as I have said in my work on "Gender and Culture Dialogue..." Shows that "there is no absolute truth; and as such, there should be no absolute authority" (14). Every carnival is a dramatization of realistic human experiences through social types. It is complete with elements of drama such as characters, spectacle, action rhythm and costume. These are exploited for the creation of live theatre which Brockett identifies in

The Theatre: An introduction as the one thing which "approximates life as it is lived and felt moment by moment" (3). The carnival can be traced to the Satyr Plays in Ancient Greek tragedy in the 5th Century B.C where the tragedians were expected to present three tragedies and a satyr play as a comic relief during drama festivals. The satyr plays used in that instance dramatized myths, but these plays were later followed by comedy which has remained a unique art form from the classical to the contemporary age (Brockett's *The Theatre* ...91-3) The basic

thing with this component of the theatre experience as Robert Cohen reveals is the willingness to "play" as character which "frees" the human feelings in order to enhance good action (23). Drama has persistently retained this function so "carnival laughter" is not restricted to the novel. The novel is a new comer to the carnivalesque when placed side by side with drama.

The use to which drama as an art form has been put in the 20th Century theatre illustrates this through its potential to speak with many voices. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* shows man's inability to initiate independent action; Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* relocates the tragic action from the domain of kings to the province of ordinary men; Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* introduces a black woman's voice into the American stage; LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* problematizes racial politics in United States of America while Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* dwarfs African leaders in their politics of material acquisition and vindictiveness. These portray the carnivalesque as a major attribute of drama. The idea which runs through the plays listed above is the ordinary man's struggle with the dilemmas of daily existence; a struggle which can be displayed most vividly through the idea of the carnivalesque.

This struggle for meaning in life, leads us to our last argument, which is on the nature of heteroglossia and its relevance to drama. John Howard Lawson's words can be used to explain this situation. He asserts that the "essential character of drama is social conflict - persons against other persons, or individual against groups, or groups against social or natural forces..." (880). Bakhtinian dialogism treats the language of the novel as two opposing subjects (the official and unofficial voices) or utterances which meet at the level of conflict. But the point which Bakhtin ignores is the fact that drama depends on conflict for movement of action; and so, there can be no serious drama without conflict.

The basis of dramatic action is the interaction between the characters on stage which goes with the tendency to generate

conflict. Again, Brooks and Hellman offer an explanation on the movement of action on stage in this statement:

The action develops and moves: it moves forward, not placidly, but with a sense of strain and conflict. There is struggle; forces come into collision, decisions are made. The action is not only meaningful action, it has the tensions of active conflict within (12).

Therefore, though other genres use conflict, "drama tends to accentuate conflict." At the beginning of a play, the audience is in a state of equilibrium, but this is disrupted as soon as the play begins through the series of conflict which the playwright deploys to explain the human condition.

In essence, drama "is a punctuation of silence" and not a "concluded," "completed" or "finished" discourse to use Bakhtin's description of other genres. This is because all the conflicts in a play can never be fully resolved within a performance situation. Consequently, the action on stage never ends; for what appears as an end is only a temporary pause. Again, Styan summarizes this situation when he asserts that "we do not ask that a play communicates forever, we do ask that a play communicates in its own time through its own medium for its own community" (3). Indeed, what people see as the end of conflict is designed to allow the characters to recoup for further action because the theatre experience is set within a limited time and space.

CONCLUSION

The novel uses dialogue to unfold plot but dialogue in the novel is not as polyphonic as it is in drama. For as long as dialogue in Bakhtin's theory thrives on the interaction of voices in social context which produces responses and counter-reactions, drama has a dialogic imperative which is unparalleled by the novel. This is because theatre deals with dialogue as spontaneous action whereas the novel focuses on dialogue as passive action. This is implied in Bernard Beckerman's comment that "the novel can be

put away, taken-up, reread" but not drama (27). This spontaneity is recaptured in Eugene O'Neill's argument that both past and present experiences are merged into "one living flame in this unique instant of time. This is drama; this is theatre - to be aware of the now" (108). In other words, drama goes with a sense of immediacy and liveliness.

These attributes are infused inside characters who are made to enact the battle for survival; but who are also willing to interact as participants in the construction of social reality. This willingness initiates carnival laughter both as a therapy for imitating and transcending the vulgarities of life. The playwright achieves this through the conscious use of language to identify human emotions and situations, shape public opinion, confront the forces of evil and initiate constructive change. No other genre does these than drama; as such, it dwells at the peak of the dialogic paradigm while the novel operates on the periphery.

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