

Lecture 12

Dialogism and Polyphony

Welcome back all of you to another lecture on literary theory. Today we are going to talk about the works of Mikhail Bakhtin who has been one of the most influential figures not only in the field of Western literary theory but also in the field of twentieth century humanities in general. This is in spite of the fact that Bakhtin was able to publish only two book-length works under his name during his life time. The rest of his creative output is primarily available in the form of long essays many of which were compiled and published only after his death.

One of the reasons why Bakhtin enjoys such a great reputation within the field of literary studies is the striking uniqueness of his works. Thus, though Bakhtin was associated with the intellectual circles of Russian Formalism and though he too like the formalists was repressed by the communist government of the day, his theoretical works on literature cannot be easily categorized under the rubric of Formalism. On the other hand, attempts to categorize his theories as poststructuralist are also misplaced. Such attempts were made primarily because his works became widely known in the Western world only during the 1980s and 1990s when post-structuralism as a theoretical school was on the rise both in the European and American academic circles. But this categorization is flawed and cannot be really sustained because Bakhtin's major works preceded by quite a few decades the rise of post-structuralism and were not in any way influenced by any of the theorists who ushered in the post-structuralist wave during the second half of the twentieth century. This resistance to easy categorization makes it imperative to study Bakhtin and his theoretical works separately. Thus, in this course we will be dedicating two lectures to exclusively focus on Bakhtin's contribution to the field of literary theory.

In this as well as in the following lecture I will be using the word “dialogism” as a blanket term to discuss some of the key theoretical concepts that Bakhtin introduced – concepts like polyphony, heteroglossia, carnivalesque and chronotope. But here I would also like to introduce a caveat. I know that some of these concepts that I just mentioned are distinct as theoretical ideas and therefore deserves to be studied individually and on their own right. But I believe that in spite of this distinctness there is an underlying coherence connecting them all. And in any case I will be using the term dialogism not to bulldoze the distinctness of these different concepts but as a rough and ready category to signify the theoretical works of Bakhtin in their totality. However, before I move on to discuss Bakhtin’s theoretical concepts, let me introduce him and his historical context.

Mikhail Bakhtin: Biography

To narrate the life of Bakhtin is to also narrate the various stories of his being discovered and rediscovered by the academic circles. The first time Bakhtin was “discovered” was in the 1960s when he had already lived for six decades and had finished some of his most important theoretical works. He was discovered by a group of young scholars who had come across his works in the Maxim Gorky institute of Moscow and who then went on to rescue Bakhtin from obscurity and bring him to the limelight. He was also discovered by the Western academic world at large during the same time when his book *Rabelais and his World* was published in English translation in 1968. It is, however, also important to be noted here that for long this was the only text of Bakhtin through which the Western academia knew him. His popularity surged further only during the 1980s when his other works were also made available in translation.

Through both these discoveries first by the group of students in Moscow and then by the Western academia at large, Bakhtin emerged on to the world stage not only as an acute scholar but also as a kind of semi-mythical heroic figure who had been both a victim and a survivor of political persecution and even more remarkably as someone who had continued to produce wonderfully thoughtful pieces of writings during this period of hardship. The problem of this emergence as a heroic figure is, however, that the biography of Bakhtin that we have with us is almost a mythologized history in which one is never quite sure about the boundary line separating fact from fiction. Nevertheless, these are the broad outlines of his life.

Bakhtin was born in 1895 in a Russian town called Orel but mostly grew up in cities like Vilnius and Odessa. The reason I mention these places is because of the impact they had on Bakhtin in terms of language. Bakhtin from his early days could speak not only Russian but also German which he picked up from his governess. This acquaintance with multiple languages was only enhanced with his move to Vilnius where, though the official language was Russian, the local people mostly spoke Polish or Lithuanian. Also Odessa where young Bakhtin spend some part of his youth was a port city where the inhabitants came from different cultural communities and spoke varied languages. Michael Holquist in his book titled *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* identifies this exposure to different social milieus where various languages are equally accepted as one of the key influences that later inspired Bakhtin's theory of many-languagedness.

Now as far as Bakhtin's education is concerned he seems to have mostly followed on the footsteps of his elder brother Nikolai. But there is also this opinion that in reality Bakhtin received very limited formal education beyond the school level and actually passed off his brothers more successful academic career as his own later on in his life. Indeed, one Bakhtin scholar is of the view that because Bakhtin's formal higher education was next to non-existent

his approach to academic research remained somewhat cavalier and he had little scruple while lifting entire sections from the book of a German philosopher named Ernst Cassirer and using them in his doctoral thesis on Rabelais.

In the decade following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Bakhtin was able to gather around himself a diverse group of intellectuals which included people like Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev. Now these names are important because during the 1920s a number of works were published under names of Voloshinov, Medvedev, and other acquaintances of Bakhtin which have been claimed by later scholars as being written by Bakhtin himself. Examples of such works of disputed authorship includes a study on Freudianism and another on Marxism and the Philosophy of Language published under the name of Voloshinov and another work titled “The Formal Method in Literary Study” published under the name of Medvedev. Irrespective of whether they were entirely written by Bakhtin himself or not, these works bear testimony to the diverse topics of research and discussion that characterized the circle of friends that Bakhtin had gathered around himself. During the 1920s Bakhtin also published a work under his own name which was a study of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky and was titled *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*. This work is one of the seminal contributions of Bakhtin to the field of literary theory which he later expanded and published under a slightly different title *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. We will be discussing this work in further details when we start elaborating Bakhtin’s theoretical concepts but for now let us move on with his life.

The year 1929, when his Dostoevsky book was published, Bakhtin was arrested and sent on exile to a distant part of Kazakhstan which was then part of the Soviet Union. And it was during his years in exile that he completed some very important monographs on the study of the novel as a literary genre, some of which now forms part of the translated collection of his essays titled *The*

Dialogic Imagination. In the late 1930s and early 1940s Bakhtin completed two other works. The first was a study on Bildungsroman or the novel of education which today only exists as a fragment because the manuscript that Bakhtin had sent to the German publisher was destroyed during the bombing of the second world war, and the copy that Bakhtin had with himself was apparently used up by him to roll cigarettes in the absence of cigarette paper. The second book was the thesis on Rabelais which he submitted in 1941 to the Maxim Gorky Institute of World Literature for a doctorate degree but which was only admitted by the institute years later and after much controversy. This is in fact the work that was later published under the title *Rabelais and his World*.

Bakhtin's fortune really began to turn in the 1960s when, as mentioned earlier, he was "discovered" not only by a larger number of readers within Russia but also abroad. Bakhtin whose health was ravaged by years of hardship and who had lost one of his legs to a decaying bone disease was now suddenly transformed from being a German teacher in an obscure town of Russia to being an intellectual hero. His last years were spent in Moscow where he returned back to the philosophical interests that he had in his younger days and worked on essays which he had produced before his Dostoevsky book. These were however not published during his life time and it was only after his death in 1975 that these along with most of his other important monographs on literary studies were compiled and published. As mentioned before, Bakhtin really became a phenomenon in the Western academia after 1980. So though some of his works now date back almost a century, their impact nevertheless retains a kind of freshness within the field of Western literary theory.

Polyphony

So with this background in place, let us now move towards his theoretical concepts and the first set of ideas that we are going to take up is the notion of polyphony and its relationship with dialogism. Now the word polyphony is originally used to denote certain pieces of music in which different melodic lines are sung or played simultaneously and parallel to each other to achieve a harmony. Bakhtin, in his study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, borrowed this term from the world of music and used it to signify what he considered as a unique feature that characterized Dostoevsky's novels. In his author's preface Bakhtin writes:

“We consider Dostoevsky one of the greatest innovators in the realm of artistic form. He created, in our opinion, a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called *polyphonic*.”

Now we will have to come back to this idea that polyphony is something that is invented as a literary device by Dostoevsky because, as we will see, in his later essay “Discourse in the Novel” he will treat polyphony as a much more universal phenomenon than he admits in his Dostoevsky book. But for now let us move down a few pages to read the lines in which Bakhtin explains more elaborately what he means by the use of polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.

Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.

There are two things here that I would like you to focus on. The first is how polyphony is being defined, and here it is important to note that polyphony is being defined not merely as a plurality of voices but rather as a plurality of *independent and unmerged* voices as well as consciousness. The qualifiers “independent” and “unmerged” are as important here as the notion of plurality and we will see why that is so in a moment. But there is also a second thing that is important to note in the quoted passage which is how polyphony is contrasted with the unity of a single authorial consciousness. Now try to think of any novel that you might have read recently and the chances are that you have encountered in that novel a number of characters each speaking their different lines. This is definitely a kind of plurality of voices, but according to Bakhtin this does not automatically mean that the novel that you have read can be categorized as a polyphonic novel. In other words, plurality of voices does not automatically lead to genuine polyphony. This is because, according to Bakhtin, many novels are written in a way that conveys just the single consciousness, the single worldview of its authors. The numerous characters that one might encounter in such a novel act merely as so many mouth pieces of the single authorial consciousness. There is plurality of speeches but not plurality of ways in which the world is being looked at and engaged with. And this uniformity is not only to be found in certain kinds of novels but may also be encountered in other literary genres like drama for instance. In a drama the illusion of plurality might be even more intense as we physically encounter different characters speaking their own different lines. But this too might not be truly polyphonic because though the author might not be visible on the stage, the lines that all the characters speak might just be so many echoes of the single authorial consciousness. This underlying unity and

sameness in a novel and by extension any other literary form is what Bakhtin describes as **monologism** – which would literally mean a single discourse or a single utterance.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's novels were able to break free of this monologism. As Bakhtin argues, "Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse"; which means that each of them has a unique consciousness, a unique way of interpreting the world around them, as well as a unique way of engaging with this world. And this translates into what Bakhtin calls the plurality of independent and unmerged voices which forms the essence of a genuine polyphony.

So whereas the assertion of the single authorial consciousness results in monologism, the presence of a genuine polyphony creates what Bakhtin calls **dialogism**. He therefore categorizes Dostoevsky's novels as not just polyphonic but also dialogic in their nature. Now here we need to understand that a literary work like a novel or even a drama might have dialogues without being dialogic. That is to say, even a monologic novel or a drama might have what is conventionally regarded as dialogues or lines uttered by different characters, but if these lines are all pervaded by the single consciousness of the author then the literary piece will not count as dialogic in Bakhtin's scheme of things. Bakhtin points out this distinction in no uncertain terms:

The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships [...] are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, everything that has meaning and significance.

This quotation makes clear the difference that Bakhtin observes between dialogues as mere rejoinders and true dialogic relationships between independent and unmerged voices. But what is interesting here is Bakhtin's assertion that dialogism is not something unique to certain kinds of literature, but rather is "an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, [and] everything that has meaning and significance". But though he states this universality of dialogism in the Dostoyevsky book he does not really develop it till in his essay "Discourse in the Novel".

Universality of Dialogism

In this later essay, written during his exile in Kazakhstan, Bakhtin elaborates on why dialogism is a universal characteristic of human discourse. He argues that whenever we direct our utterance towards an object, and this object might be a physical object but it might as well be an idea or concept, then our words enter into a dialogue with other utterances. As Bakhtin writes, "[b]etween the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object".

Though this might sound rather esoteric, the idea is actually quite simple. Imagine discussing with your sister the last movie that you watched, or arguing with your friends about which restaurant serves the best kebabs, or conversing with your classmate about the nature of Romanticism in the poetry of John Keats. In all of these instances your utterances are directed towards different objects some of which are material like for instance restaurants or kebabs and others are abstract like the nature of Romanticism for instance. Now none of these utterances are spoken in a vacuum. All of these objects have already been spoken about by others and your words are thus articulated within a space which is already marked by these previous utterances—

or, to use Bakhtin's phrase, "alien words" that have been spoken by others. So your utterance is always in a dialogue with these previous utterances and it is precisely by being in a dialogue that any particular utterance gains meaning. If I were to come up with utterances about something that nobody has ever heard of or spoken about then there is little chance of me making any sense. Thus, in Bakhtin's words:

Any concrete word finds the object towards which it is directed always and already qualified, as it were, disputed, evaluated, enveloped by an obscuring mist, or, on the contrary, by the light of other words already spoken about it. [...] The word directed towards its object enters this dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of other words, evaluations and accents, weaves itself into their complex inter-relations, merges with some, [and] recoils from or intersects with others.

Therefore, any concrete language use is automatically dialogic because utterances can only be meaningful once it enters the tension-filled environment of other words which are articulated by people with consciousness that are independent and unmerged from my own. This will mean that an example of a concrete language use like the novel cannot but be dialogical, and dialogism is therefore not something that is merely confined to the particular novels of Dostoevsky. Of course it is very possible that in certain texts like those written by Dostoevsky this dialogism is made more pronounced by stylistic innovations and in some texts the monologic tendency to assert a singular authorial viewpoint dominates. But even in those later kinds of texts it is possible to hear the echoes of alien words of other independent consciousness which creates the field of signification and meaning making. So even if the author's tendency is monologic, it is possible

for a text to be read dialogically by going beyond the authorial intention and by locating the traces of the tension-filled environment within which utterances gain meaning. We will see how this possibility of reading the underlying conflicts, contradictions and plurality within any particular text plays an important role in other Bakhtinian concepts like heteroglossia or carnivalesque which we will take up in our next lecture. Thank you.