

Lecture 13

Dialogism: Heteroglossia, Carnavalesque and Chronotope

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on literary theory. Today we are going to continue with some of the other theoretical concepts that were introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin. More precisely we are going to focus on three topics – the first being heteroglossia, the second carnivalesque and the third chronotope.

But before we start discussing these new concepts I would like to briefly look back on the discussion of our previous lecture and try to situate Bakhtin and his work within the broader context of this course on literary theory. In my previous lecture, I had insisted on Bakhtin's uniqueness as a theorist. But here I would like to suggest that in spite of his uniqueness Bakhtin's work can be placed, to borrow one of his own terms, "dialogically" vis-à-vis some of the established schools of literary theory of the twentieth century. Thus, for instance, Bakhtin's focus on discourse and the way discourses are constructed and structured places his work squarely within tradition of twentieth century western literary theory that follows what I have referred to as the linguistic turn. We have already seen this Bakhtinian preoccupation with language in our previous discussion on polyphony and we will notice it even more strongly when we take up for discussion the concept of heteroglossia today.

But connected with this linguistic turn is another characteristic aspect, which is the relegation of the author to the margins of literary criticism. And in this aspect too we see Bakhtin's work sharing certain similarities with New Criticism, Russian Formalism and later theories of structuralism and post-structuralism. For instance, in Bakhtin's theory of polyphony we have already seen a prioritizing of the multiplicity of utterances. There the authorial voice exists but

only as one among the various other independent voices and consciousnesses that constitute the tension-filled dialogic space of concrete language use.

However, while noticing these connections we also need to be aware of the singularities of Bakhtin's theories which does not allow us to read them as either part of Russian formalism or as part of the later poststructuralist movement. And as we deal with more of his theoretical concepts today, this uniqueness of Bakhtin should become even more apparent to us.

Polyglossia

The first theoretical concept that we will focus on is heteroglossia, and the texts that we would use to understand this concept is two of Bakhtin's long essays that were later compiled in the English edition titled *The Dialogic Imagination*. The names of these essays are, "Discourse in the novel", which we have already briefly discussed in our previous lecture, and "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse". Now as you will remember, Bakhtin through his concept of polyphony was already working on a theory of multiplicity or plurality in discourse. But in his Dostoyevsky book this exploration was framed as well limited by readings of Dostoyevsky's novels. Nevertheless, even then, a careful reader of Bakhtin's study on Dostoyevsky would be able to perceive that this polyphonic plurality is not merely a feature of the novel of a particular author but a more widespread phenomenon that is inherent to how language is used. And heteroglossia is in a way a study of this plurality that we had already encountered in the idea of polyphony but at the level of language use in general and not just at the level of stylistic features observable in particular novels. However, before we make this transition from polyphony to heteroglossia we need to deal with another term which Bakhtin introduces in his essays compiled in *The Dialogic Imagination* – and the term is **polyglossia**.

The word polyglossia might sound completely unfamiliar especially to those who are not yet acquainted with Bakhtin's theories, but a related form of that same term is quite extensively used in mundane English conversation, which is "polyglot". The dictionary meaning of polyglot is a person who can read, write, or understand several different languages. For instance, most of the Indians who are educated beyond their school and college levels are polyglots who are comfortable communicating in at least three if not more languages. The term polyglossia, as you might now be able to guess, refers to this many-languagedness. But then what does it mean in Bakhtin's theory? Well according to Bakhtin the consciousness of polyglossia shatters the myth of the isolation of national languages and the literature produced in those languages.

So here, first we will have to understand what a national language might mean. Now within the multi-lingual Indian context, relating nation with one language might sound like a rather alien idea. But the sense of nationalism as it started spreading in Europe from after the French Revolution was mainly pivoted on the concept of linguistic similarity. So the nationalist argument is that France is the country of the French speakers, Germany is the country of German speakers, Spain is the country of Spanish speakers, and so on and so forth. Now you will also have to remember here that the boundaries of these European nations as individual nation-states only got fixed after the First World War so the idea of nation-state as a pervasive phenomenon is really recent in world history. But nonetheless, the point is, in Europe there is till-date a very strong association between nation and language. So the national language of France would be French and the national language of Germany will be German etc. In contrast if you look at India, we do not have a single national language. So unlike what many of us might think, Hindi is not the national language of India, and there is even a Gujarat High Court Judgement on this matter. But of course Bakhtin was writing within the European context, and within that context,

speaking about national languages, and national literatures produced in those languages, made perfect sense.

Now since any form of nationalism stresses on exclusivity, there is often a myth of uniqueness surrounding national languages too. To sustain the exclusivity that is proffered by nationalism, national languages are looked in isolation and considered as existing in a state of uncontaminated purity. According to Bakhtin, the consciousness of polyglossia shatters this myth of the isolation of national languages by pointing out its dialogic relationship with other foreign languages. Of course in certain societies the consciousness of the presence of other foreign languages might be limited and here Bakhtin's example is the society of classical Greek antiquity where the myth of an isolated Greek language and Greek literature sustained a sense of Greek nationalism in spite of the administrative division of Greece among city state or poleis. And we have talked about this proto-nationalism in terms of a shared Greek culture sphere in our lectures on Plato and Aristotle. But in most cases, these myths of isolated national languages cannot be sustained and the presence of other, foreign languages have to be accommodated. In other words, it becomes imperative to develop a consciousness of polyglossia. Here, Bakhtin's example is that of imperial Rome whose language Latin though it maintained the links between the entire sprawling empire could not exist within the cocoon of linguistic isolation. The imprint of the preceding Greek culture was so heavy on the Roman Empire that its language Latin was always informed by the spectral presence of the Greek language with which it was in dialogic relationship.

For us this kind of polyglossia is more easily understandable within our Indian context. Thus take any of the vernacular Indian languages that we might speak. We will soon realise that we do not use that language in isolation. Rather our language use is constantly informed by the presence of other languages – be it the English language which is our colonial inheritance or the

other Indian languages that we might know or might hear regularly spoken around us. This sets up precisely the kind of dialogic relationship that we had discussed in our previous lecture on polyphony. Our utterances in any one language enters a tension-filled space where it interacts with and rebounds from other alien utterances in other foreign languages. Thus for instance the English that I am speaking to you now is constantly being inter-illuminated in my mind with other languages like Bangla or Urdu or Hindi for instance. And the same thing happens when I speak in Bangla. The spectral presence of English and Hindi is unmistakably present then.

So conceptually this is what it boils down to at the most fundamental level: Bakhtin through his ideas like polyphony or polyglossia was attacking and undermining certain very persistent and pervasive myths of unity and homogeneity. In the first case it was the myth of a single homogenous authorial voice and consciousness that he was attacking through the idea of polyphony and in the second case it was the myth of an isolated and homogenous linguistic nationalism that was being attacked through the idea of polyglossia. It is precisely in the place of this unity, homogeneity and singleness that Bakhtin was offering his idea of dialogic relationship where a plurality of elements, be they different voices or different languages, interpenetrate and inter-illuminate each other. If we are clear about this, then the idea of heteroglossia will be quite easy to understand.

Heteroglossia

Indeed, one of the best ways to understand heteroglossia is through the term polyglossia. So, what polyglossia does to a language externally, heteroglossia does to that language internally. In other words, heteroglossia signifies how a language is dialogized from within. Now again like much of the things that we will encounter in this course on literary theory these cryptic sentences and formulae sounds more complicated than they actually are. So what does it mean to say that

heteroglossia dialogizes a language from within? Let us try and think about our language uses in day to day context. You will see that even when you are speaking the same language, Bangla for instance, you are speaking it differently depending upon the context, upon the audience, upon whether you are connected to your listener over the phone or over a device where you can see his or her face while communicating, and many other such factors. I am sure if we think about it, it will not take any of us much time to figure out that we use language differently when we are talking say for instance to our mother from when we are talking to our boss or our best friend. This means that even when we are talking in one particular language our usage is thoroughly stratified and pluralized from within.

In fact, Bakhtin in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” provides a much more comprehensive list of such internal stratification which goes beyond the examples that I have just cited. Thus, Bakhtin talks about:

social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases).

This internal stratification is what Bakhtin refers to as heteroglossia. And since each of these stratified components interact with and inter-illuminate each other like different languages do in the case of polyglossia we again come across the notion of a dialogic relationship. Thus whereas polyglossia dialogizes a language from without by bringing it in contact with other languages, heteroglossia dialogizes a language from within by establishing an interplay between the various stratifications of that language use. Now a novel, which typically pitches different characters

from different social strata against each other in different conditions and contexts, would obviously be a literary form where the use of dialogism of language would be the most markedly observable. And therefore it is no wonder that Bakhtin started with the novels of Dostoyevsky to gradually build first his theory of polyphony and then the more sophisticated concepts of polyglossia and heteroglossia. But even then we have to remember that the dialogism that is triggered by polyglossia or heteroglossia is not any special feature of a particularly literary genre or the other. Rather they inform any and all concrete uses of language. Thus even if an author shows monologic tendencies it is still possible to locate in his work traces of dialogized polyglossia and heteroglossia. Indeed, as we will see later, reading a text against its grain and locating the traces of plurality of voices beyond the authorial consciousness is one of the characteristic features of a literary theory like postcolonialism. But for now let us move forward and take up for our discussion another typical Bakhtinian concept – the carnivalesque.

Carnavalesque

The word carnivalesque is derived from the familiar root word carnival which signifies an occasion of festivity and celebration. And the most iconic image that comes up in our mind when we discuss carnival is the image of some kind of a spectacle involving parades of riotous crowds, of unusually bright colours and dresses and generally of scenes of wild revelry and abandon.

Bakhtin points out that such carnivals were an integral part of the medieval European social life. Riotous spectacles, which even today forms the principal image of a carnival, could be regularly seen in the market squares of all medieval European towns and cities.

Now Bakhtin observes that these bawdy celebrations which characterized the spirit of carnival was deeply subversive in nature. The spectacles usually revolved around the willful suspension of the social rules and hierarchies that were otherwise strictly imposed. So for instance in a

carnival, a buffoon could be seen playing the role of a king, or ecclesiastical figures would be seen being parodied and ridiculed in street acts. So in general it involved a turning upside down of the social norms as they were otherwise known – a placing of the foolish over the wise, the poor over the rich and so on. As Bakhtin noted, the underlying spirit of these carnivals was to challenge and even degrade the hierarchical regulations that guided the medieval societies and constructed the formal and official truth about it. So, as Bakhtin writes in his book *Rabelais and His World*: “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”

Now, such turning upside down of the social hierarchies and norms through laughter dismantled, however temporarily, the official and formal discourses and truths of social existence and situated them within a field of multiple other possibilities. This tension-filled space of contradictory, subversive, and alternate social possibilities again brings us back to the familiar notion of dialogism. However, whereas we have so far encountered the idea of dialogism only in relation to language and its literary expressions, Bakhtin’s writings on the spirit of carnival shows that the site of dialogism is as much social as linguistic.

But then how does this conception of the carnivalesque spirit inform our understanding of Bakhtin’s literary theory? Well, according to Bakhtin, with the advent of the Renaissance in Europe, carnivals were gradually squeezed out of the public life by the state authority to control its subversive possibilities. However, Bakhtin argues that as the spirit of the carnivalesque were denied their presence in the form of street spectacles, they were gradually absorbed by literature. Literary genres like parody and satire started performing the same kind of subversion and degradation of the social hierarchies and official truths that were done through carnivals.

As an example of this absorption of the carnivalesque in literature, Bakhtin mentions the sixteenth century French writer Francois Rabelais and his famous satirical prose piece named *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*. But what is important for us to note here, that according to Bakhtin, it is not this one work that is imbued with the carnivalesque. Rather, the whole genre of the novel can be read as a literary form that is open to the tendencies of the carnivalesque. This is because unlike an epic, for instance, which is a product of the hierarchical world of the pre-modern age and is therefore in complete sync with the official truths and the formal discourses of that world, a novel is still a comparatively new and emerging genre which can not only accommodate the official discourses of the social hierarchy but also the parodic discourses ridiculing and challenging them. And this dialogic placing together of different discourses, as we have already seen, is one of the hall marks of major novelists like Dostoevsky.

Chronotope

So before we end our discussion on Bakhtin today, I would just like to briefly touch on the concept of chronotope which is also one of the more typical theoretical ideas that characterize Bakhtin's contribution to the field of literary theory. The term chronotope actually builds upon two separate Greek terms, the "chronos" which means time and the "topos" which means space. And the theory of chronotope is basically something that explores the dialogic relationship between space and time and the way different chronotopes or space-time relations inform different kinds of literature. So let me clarify this with an example. Think of all the romances of the kings and queens and prince and princesses that you might have read as a child. Now try and think about the way time unfolded in those romances. Can you remember a romance in which the hero during the course of his adventures grow old or become feeble or changed in personality? I think not. Yet such change is precisely what characterizes the everyday passage of time in our life. So

in the romances, unlike in our lives, hours, days, nights and even seasons and years pass, while nothing seems to change. No one seems to age or grow old or even change his or her attitude towards life or towards the fellow human beings. In other words, the time of the romance is what might be referred to as empty adventure-time.

Now think again about the space or the location against which the adventures of the romances were enacted. These spaces, even if referred to were only mentioned in their most generic details and didn't really have any impact on the story. Think of some of the Bollywood romances for instance, where neither the hero nor the heroine is usually seen growing old and where the locales in which their romance unfolds is so irrelevant that the director is not even apologetic about shooting a song sequence in distant Croatia, or Hungary or New Zealand for a film that is otherwise shot in India. So the empty adventure time in a romance is usually coupled with an empty space to create a unique chronotope of its own. But this chronotope or space-time relationship is not universal. So for instance if you will compare this with the kind of time-space relationship in a bildungsroman you will see that the chronotope there is completely different, and that is primarily because unlike in the romance, in a bildungsroman, the entire story hinges on the idea that the protagonist actually grows and changes over a period of time.

Unfortunately, because of time constraint I am unable to explore in further details the various different kinds of chronotope that Bakhtin writes about, but I would definitely encourage you to study them in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". And with this we end our discussion on Bakhtin and his theories of dialogism. In our next lecture we will again take up a new topic. Thank you.