

Polyphonic Consciousness in Fyodor Dostoevsky and James Joyce

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Abstract: *Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the innovative literary concept of “polyphony” in his book Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. The concept of “polyphony” continues to influence literary studies even today. Polyphony or “multi-voicedness” is radically a “new theory of authorial point of view” (Clark and Holquist 3) which allows autonomous voices to coexist without being subordinated to a single authorial point of view. Thus, polyphony undermines monologic world views and authoritarian discourses.*

Keywords: Polyphony, unfinalisability, self-conscious, consciousness, plot, surplus of vision

1. Introduction

Bakhtin outlines polyphony as a unique characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels by highlighting the distinctiveness of Fyodor Dostoevsky as a polyphonic writer who created a completely new type of artistic thinking called the “polyphonic.” Dostoevsky, according to him created “a fundamentally new artistic genre” and succeeded in “constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the fundamentally monologic (homophonic) European novel” (PDP 8). Later Bakhtin modified his perspective stating that Dostoevsky is not an “isolated instance in the history of the novel” (PDP 44) and that the polyphonic novel he created had predecessors. According to Bakhtin, the ancient folkloric genres, the “Socratic dialogues” and “Menippean Satires” also made a great impact on the polyphonic novel. Thus, Bakhtin concludes that all novels are polyphonic.

What Bakhtin does in eulogising Dostoevsky as a polyphonic writer is to show “what is unique to him” or to show the “Dostoevsky in Dostoevsky” and thus to give Dostoevsky’s novels a unique place in the milieu of novelistic polyphony. Bakhtin always associates the name of Dostoevsky with polyphonic writing and Dostoevsky’s novels are now synonyms for polyphonic novels.

Following Bakhtin’s line of argument, this paper attempts to study the modernist writer James Joyce as a genuine successor of Dostoevsky. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a representative modernist novel that has exerted tremendous influence on later novelists. By analysing the traits of polyphony in *Ulysses*, this paper establishes the fact that Joyce is a true successor of Dostoevsky.

If Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as an exemplary exponent of polyphony in Russian literature, the critic Sheldon Brivic sees James Joyce as Dostoevsky’s counterpart in English literature. He asserts Joyce’s unique position as a polyphonic writer stating that no one “before Joyce had expressed such a plural consciousness or taken such a multiphonic point of view” (58). He makes specific reference to Joyce’s polyphonic stance in *Ulysses* when he mentions that the author introduces “multiple levels of discourse” which “frees the work from the authority of a single author” (Brivic 57-58).

Self Conscious Hero and The New Authorial Position

The uniqueness of a polyphonic novel is that the characters are autonomous and all the characters are free from authorial control. A distinct feature of a polyphonic novel is the presence of a highly independent, self-conscious hero who requires a special representation in the novel. The hero’s position in the polyphonic novel is as important as that of the author. He stands alongside the author, as another individual human being and listens to the author, responds to him and agrees or disagrees with him. He is a thoroughly “self-conscious hero” who has the capacity to comprehend reality about himself as well as of others out of which he forms himself. The polyphonic novels deconstruct the finalised image of the “stable and fixed” embodied hero of monologic novels. What the author used to do now is done by the hero who now “illuminates himself from all sides” (PDP 51).

A new authorial position is also required to depict a new kind of a hero in a polyphonic novel. The author’s task in a polyphonic novel is now reduced to discover the sum total of the hero’s consciousness and ultimately the “hero’s final word on himself and his on his world” (PDP 48). This idea closely resembles the “Uncle Charles Principle” identified by Hugh Kenner in James Joyce’s works. According to this principle, Joyce uses the language and idioms of the hero himself in defining him instead of using the narrator’s idiom for describing the hero. (Kenner, Joyce’s Voices 18).

In a polyphonic novel, the voice of the author is not dominant and the characters “answer back” with great freedom. The author’s position in a polyphonic novel is a “highly positive and active “one and he acts as an “organiser and participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself the final word”(PDP 72).The polyphonic author, like Goethe’s Prometheus “creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus) but free people capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (PDP 6).

Surplus of vision

According to Bakhtin, the author of a monologic text possesses an “excess surplus of vision” over his characters that enables him to see things that the characters do not see.

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In polyphonic novels, the author does not have this “surplus” of vision. Here the author possesses only that “indispensable minimum of pragmatic, purely information-bearing ‘surplus’ necessary to carry forward the story” (PDP 73). It is this lack of surplus consciousness that allows the meeting of consciousness in a polyphonic novel. Joyce’s conception about the position of the author in his novels is quite similar to Bakhtin’s notion about the non-interfering position of the author in polyphonic novels. Joyce’s aesthetic theory describing the impersonality of the author in artistic works reads as follows: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails (Joyce, Portrait 397). Both Joyce and Bakhtin see the author as remaining more or less hidden and non-interfering and possessing less “surplus of vision” in comparison to their counterparts in monologic literature.

Plot in Polyphonic Novels

The chief characteristic of polyphonic novels is a “plurality of independent and unmerged consciousness” (PDP 6). A linear development of plot or character resulting in exposition and closure cannot explain the “pluralistic” world of the polyphonic novel. The plot in polyphonic novels does not finalise the characters or events. The purpose of the plot “is to place a person in various situations that expose and provoke him, to bring people together and to make them collide and conflict” (PDP 276-77). The polyphonic author does not invent his characters, instead he creates his characters: “The new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a fully realised and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalisability and indeterminacy of the hero” (PDP 64).

Joyce disliked the conventionality of the heroes represented in his novels. Joyce believed that in occasions like war, everyone has to do what others do and they even wear the same uniform. It is only in private and individual actions that one could show individuality: “cutting bread displays character better than cutting throats” (Budgen 75). James H Maddox, Jr considers it a “paradox of *Ulysses* that although no character has ever been subjected to such intense scrutiny as Mr Bloom, neither has any character ever so triumphantly escaped final definition” (11). It is this “final definition” that the polyphonic hero evades. Bloom always tries to “destroy that framework of other people’s words about him that might finalise and deaden him” (PDP 59). As Richard Pearce points out that “[m]any voices contribute to the telling of his [Bloom’s] story; indeed, each chapter brings in a new voice, which may augment, counterpoint, undermine, or usurp the authorial storytelling voice” (60). Joyce tries to depict a fully “rounded” character in *Ulysses*. By a “rounded” character Joyce only means that he is interested in a figure that is “the home of a full human personality” (Budgen 21). Joyce was thus very close to the idea of the “personality” or “the man in man” of the Dostoevskian (polyphonic) characters, which can be reached only from a “new and integral authorial position” (PDP 58). By “man in man” Bakhtin means the capacity of a person to reveal himself -- a revelation that only he can do through a display of his consciousness. Thus, Bakhtin’s

notion of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic heroes seems to fit in with Joyce’s notion of heroes.

According to Bakhtin, the hero’s “unresolved” psychological state is an important feature of the Dostoevskian /polyphonic hero. Dostoevsky does not allow his highly self-conscious heroes to arrive at a sudden conclusion or insight. He represents the person on the “threshold of a final decision” or at a “moment of crisis” or at an “unfinalizable and unpredictable turning point for the soul” (PDP 61). The “crisis” of Leopold Bloom’s soul or the main issue that haunts the hero of *Ulysses* as well as the reader throughout the novel is the supposed adultery of Bloom’s wife Molly (*Ulysses* 59-60). It is this “crisis” that keeps him an “unfinalized” character throughout the novel. Goldman sees Joyce’s technique of allowing Molly the final word in the novel as a ploy “to protect Joyce from putting a definitive stamp upon the portrait of Bloom” (The Joyce Paradox, 110).

Unfinalisability

Bakhtin disliked the conventional idea of the work of art as a finished or closed thing. According to him, a work of art will live only if it is engaged in a dialogue. Dialogue is possible only in works that are not closed, i.e. in works that are still open ended; in works in which their authors do not retain their final word about their characters. According to Bakhtin, the “canonised” genres like the epic, tragedy and the lyric are “monologic,” i.e., they try to establish a single style and a unified voice and express a singular world view. But prose literature and novelistic discourse in particular are “polyphonic” or “dialogic.” The characteristic feature of prose that distinguishes itself from poetry is its ability “to employ on the plane of a single work discourses of various types” (PDP 200), i.e. its pre-eminently polyphonic nature. Novel, according to Bakhtin is a “developing genre” that expresses “anti closure” in contrast to epic that expresses “closure” (DI 7). Bakhtin points out that classical novelists like Tolstoy insisted on “closure” and “finalisability” in their novels whereas writers like Dostoevsky preferred to leave their works “open” and “unfinished.” What Bakhtin means to say here is that Tolstoy is a monologic writer and Dostoevsky a polyphonic/dialogic writer.

2. Conclusion

Bakhtin considers Dostoevsky to be one of the most prominent polyphonic writers but Joyce disliked Dostoevsky for what he saw as the portrayal of “unreal” situations (Budgen 184). Bakhtin views Dostoevsky’s characters as embodiments of self-consciousness and the hero of *Ulysses* can likewise be seen as an ideal self-conscious hero. Although Joyce and Bakhtin differed in their admiration for authors such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony can be effectively applied to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Taking the traits of a polyphonic novel like dialogism, multiplicity of voices and autonomous consciousness into consideration, we can assume that Joyce’s *Ulysses* is also a novel that depicts polyphony at its best.

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