



‘Polyphony’ in Select Short Stories of Baig Ehsas

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Abstract

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism offers an interesting perspective to analyze poetry and prose. The dialogic speech, he argues, involves multiplicity of speakers and perspectives. In a novel or short story, different characters speak in different voices and represent different worldviews on a variety of subjects and themes. In the light of the Bakhtinian philosophy, this paper explores multiplicity of speakers and cultural contexts in two short stories of noted Urdu fiction writer Baig Ehsas, focusing particularly on spatiotemporal discourse. The two stories are: ‘Dakhma’ and ‘Dard ke Khemey’. Both the Urdu stories are part of short stories collection that won Sahitya Akademi Award. These stories are available in English. They appear in ‘Shades of the City’ a collection of short stories.

Keywords: Dialogism; Mikhail Bakhtin; Baig Ehsas; Dakhma; Urdu Short Stories

Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Twentieth Century semiotician and literary critic, proposed a new theory of dialogism and polyphony in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. He observes: “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.” (Bakhtin 1984: 6) He appears interested in analyzing difference between monologic and a polyphonic use of discourse. The concept of ‘polyphony’ means multiple voices. Bakhtin argues in his analysis of the novel of Feodor Dostoevsky that the world of dialogic novel

contains many different voices and worldviews, which is contrary to single-voice discourse or monologism.

From a Bakhtinian point of view, every new statement presupposes earlier statements or is a response to something of the past, and it anticipates future response. Bakhtin argues that “any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances.” (1986: 84) Any utterance is either a question or an answer or an agreement or disagreement. Through our utterances, we are always in dialogue with the things and people in the world. Bakhtin further states, "I live in a world of others' words." (1986: 143)

The dialogic speech, Bakhtin argues, involves multiplicity of speakers and perspectives. The dialogic novel interweaves variety of speeches into the text to exhibit different ideas and worldviews. In a novel, there are multiple speeches—of author, narrator and characters, who make the novel polyphonic. The novel acts as a locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide. In other words, “diversity of voices and heteroglossia” exist in a novelistic discourse (Bakhtin 1981: 275)

In the light of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, this paper explores multiplicity of speakers and cultural contexts in two short stories of Baig Ehsas, a Sahitya Akademi awardee in Urdu short fiction. The two stories selected for the study are *Dakhma* and *Dard ke Khemey*. These two stories have recognized with a national award and its translations are available in English. The paper focuses particularly on space and time as thematic concerns in the two stories and their location within the collection of short stories in which they appear.

Dialogism And Short Stories

So far as novel as a genre is concerned, Bakhtin clearly regard polyphonic discourse as its essential characteristic. A novel usually contains multiple characters in addition to having roles of narrator and author. The novel contains a centrifugal logic and its author could be found “at the centre of organization where all levels intersect”. (Bakhtin 1981: 49) Due to the potential dialogic discourse in fiction, contradictory or complimentary concepts and ideologies intersect in the text and context as well.

Similarly, a short story also possesses novelistic features, including variety of characters, voices, and concepts—though within its limited length. When fiction is translated, the translator also adds meaning to the context as the author, narrator and characters do. Tutun Mukherjee, who translated some of the stories of Baig Eshas from Urdu into English, has observed a few interesting things about translation. She says, “Translation is in itself a learning process because it entails the negotiation between two cultures and two language systems.” (12)

In view of the above discussed arguments, the authors have attempted to analyze short stories of Baig Eshas particularly to highlight different voices within selected short stories.

Stories of Baig Eshas

In the short stories of Baig Eshas, Hyderabad, its cultures, history and people take center stage. His stories revolve around mundane events of lives of people of the city. His keen interest in history and culture of the city, along with his observation of everyday events in people’ lives and his mastery over Urdu language to craft succinct and emotionally loaded stories set him apart from numerous other writers. According to Tutun Mukharjee, his stories explore “a range of emotions” including “confusion, pain, regret, remorse, anxiety, alienation” and the appeal of his stories “lies in the deeper understanding of the human condition that they convey.” (13) Upon reading his stories, one even sometimes get reminded of those simple in narration yet powerful in impression stories of Sadat Hasan Manto. About the craft of Baig Eshas, Gopichand Narang observed in *Foreword* that he uses symbolic and allegorical techniques “to delineate the personal and social problems of the Muslim milieu, especially in and around Hyderabad and their emotional links with expatriates living in the Gulf countries.” (7)

Both the stories selected for the study, *Dakhma* and *Dard Ke Khemey*, are part of the collection of eleven short stories of Baig Eshas in Urdu published under the title ‘Dakhma’. These two stories contain discourse on the city, its culture and changes that have happened over a period. Narrated in first person,

each story's narrator acts as organizer and brings together different points of view on the subject of the city and its culture in relation to time.

Dakhma is a story of Parsi graveyard and 'maikada' (tavern) of a Parsi in the city of Hyderabad. Narrator of the story, who was born and brought up in the city, gives a firsthand account of *dakhma* located in the Parsigutta area. The story is not only a blend of three different cultures, histories and co-existence but also a discourse on it. A brief sketch of each of the three cultures builds the narrative. While talking to his friends, the narrator juxtaposes the present day life and culture of the city with what existed decades ago. He builds the discourse through involving different views of characters in the story, including two main characters Sohrab and Musheer. Once a popular spot for writers and artists, the *maikada* of Sohrab goes out of business after witnessing two different reigns—of Nizams and Nawabs, and of new democratic Telugu rulers. Sohrab does not want to talk about its fall, but the narrator remarks: "That was the reign of royalty. These are democratic times." (Ehsas 133) The narrator further says, "In a few years time everything had changed." (Ehsas 127) Another dimension to the discourse comes from Musheer, who had lived in the United States after fleeing from the city in turbulent times.

Similarly, *Dard Ke Khemey* is another story wherein the narrator, who hails from Hyderabad, visits his relatives in a city in Turkey. An emotional conversation between the narrator and his brother-in-law, along with involvement of his niece, develops into a discourse on the city, its past and present. The brother-in-law, who moved to the Turkish city with his family decades ago and faced hardships of migration, views Hyderabad as a safe city. He complains, "We could not make this land our own." (Mukharjee 28) He tells the narrator, "You never had to experience the pain of separation and alienation..." (33) On the contrary, the narrator intends to reveal what challenges and turbulences they faced in Hyderabad. A thought flashes in his mind, "We too had borne the pain of alienation in our city. The traces of our culture persisted but in few pockets..." But he chooses to remain silent. Later, he declares that "the unique character of the city was lost; it became one among hundreds of similar metropolises – a jungle of concrete." (33) Apart from these

contradictory views, the niece thinks the Turkish city is beautiful while the narrator thinks Hyderabad is beautiful. The narrator admits, “Yes we have the freedom to move about and work...I can understand the changes that are taking place...” (33)

Conclusion

The stories of Indian Sahitya Akademi awardee Baig Ehsas contain discourses on space and time, and a variety of perspectives that come from different characters and the narrator. In his two stories, namely *Dakhma* and *Dark Ke Khaimey*, one gets distinct historical and cultural realities of the Indian city of Hyderabad. The author, narrators and characters in the stories represent different perspectives of history and culture of the city.

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