

# THE NOVEL AS ART: PERSPECTIVES FROM BAKHTIN AND LAWRENCE

*Chiranjibi Kafle\**

## ABSTRACT

*Literary world continued to face a clash of opinion for long as to whether the popular genre, the novel, should be regarded as representing artistic literary heritage. As literary scholarship often traced a line separating poetic discourse from the novelistic discourse, readers as well as scholars were in a state of dilemma whether to recognize the novel as artistic genre. However, with authors like DH Lawrence and critics like Mikhail Bakhtin, the confusion no longer needs to hound us. This article is an attempt to see why and how the novelistic discourse is fit enough to be considered artistic discourse and the novel an artistic genre of literature. As a methodology to look into the issue, scholarly perspectives forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin and DH Lawrence have been taken into consideration. Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia' and Lawrence's 'wholeness of life' have been adopted as the basic theoretical tool while the textual references are mainly based on their essays entitled "Discourse in the Novel" and "Why the Novel Matters," respectively. The article concludes that Bakhtin's appreciation of novelistic discourse as something that enabled the "representation of heteroglossia..." and Lawrence's description of the novel as the "book of life" are both equally potent scholarly defenses establishing the novel as artistic genre.*

## BACKGROUND

Traditional stylistics and contemporary literary scholarship did not recognize novel as artistic genre, although novelistic discourse has also its own artistic quality, with scope to deal with social reality in a much wider way. Critics of novelistic discourse, for example Gustav Shpet, a Russian professor who had profound influence on the formalists, especially Roman Jakobson, called the novelistic discourse a "moral propaganda in rhetorical forms" having "no aesthetic value." They argued that the artistic discourse was exclusively a poetic discourse in nature. But, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, also a Russian but with a different viewpoint, such a conception of artistic discourse was "narrow and cramped" and one that could not "accommodate the artistic prose of novelistic discourse." Amidst such a clash of opinion, the readers can easily see a line drawn to separate the poetic discourse from the novelistic discourse.

## OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this article is to see whether or not the novelistic discourse is fit enough to be considered artistic discourse and the novel an artistic genre of literature. The secondary objectives would be to ponder on the

---

\*Lecturer, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

arguments raised by scholars and evaluate their relevance and validity in the given socio-cultural and academic context.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As a methodology for the study of the concerns as outlined in the above mentioned objective, scholarly perspectives forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin and DH Lawrence have been taken into consideration. Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia' and Lawrence's 'wholeness of life' have been adopted as the basic theoretical tool while the major textual references are based on their essays entitled "Discourse in the Novel" and "Why the Novel Matters," respectively.

### **BAKHTIN'S ARGUMENT**

The key thesis of Bakhtin's argument is concerned with pinpointing the representation of heteroglossia, that is, the multiple voices from the diverse social order, which is achieved through the process of dialogism, where the voices or responses from the listeners help to shape up the expressions or ideas of the speakers, thus making the discourse a realistic and socially accommodative process.

Every discourse is made up of language. For Bakhtin, language is "not a system of abstract grammatical categories," but rather an "ideologically saturated system of interaction," that is, the language as a "worldview ensuring maximum mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life" (Bakhtin 2005).

Unlike the formalists, Bakhtin underscores the social nature of language and says that it is through the process of interaction with one another that human beings are able to structure their utterances or discourses. He calls this interactive process 'dialogism' and argues that this process is open to acceptance of opinions, ideas or voices of a variety of people from diverse socio-cultural background (heteroglossia). He also argues that while the voice in other so-called artistic genre, for example, poetry, tragedy or epic represents a monological discourse—wherein the author's views are all important—the voices of the masses find its right outlet or due representation in the prose art called novel, where authorial tyranny is absent and views of others are considered equally important and are duly accommodated.

According to Bakhtin, the 'polyphonic' type of fiction in which a "variety of discourses expressing different ideological positions are set in play without being ultimately placed and judged by a totalizing authorial discourse" is in fact "an inherent characteristic of the novel as a literary form—one that he traced back to its origins in the 'parodying-travesty' genres of classical and medieval culture—the satyr play, the Menippean satire and popular culture of carnival" (Lodge 2005). This suggests that the novel provides ample space for recognition of socio-cultural diversity.

### **POETIC VERSUS NOVELISTIC DISCOURSES**

In his seminal essay entitled "Discourse in the Novel," written sometime between 1934 and 1935 (Pandey 2005), Bakhtin makes a defense of novel (and similar other prose writing) as artistic genre, without denying the poetry and other

artistic genres such as epic and tragedy their traditionally secured claims of being 'artistic.' However, he draws a pragmatic comparison between the poetic and novelistic discourses and establishes how novelistic discourse is far ahead in its democratic, pluralistic and inclusive fervor, seemingly empowering the voice of the commoners and ensuring wider representation of social and cultural diversity. The way he argues could be explained or summarized as follows.

<i>Poetic Discourse</i>	<i>Novelistic Discourse</i>
Unmediated expression of authorial individuality (the tone: monological)	Author either absent or present in culturally harmonious way; directly absent but indirectly omnipresent (the tone: dialogical or polyphonic)
Reliance on unitary language (that of author) and closed stylistics	Reliance on rhetorical forms based on openness and acceptance of heteroglossia
Rigidity and the rule in focus.	Flexibility and agreements prioritized
Guided by centripetal forces (of language)	Guided and inspired by centrifugal forces (of language)
Smooth, centralized unity (of verbal, ideological tone)	Contradiction-ridden, tension-filled, decentralized unity
Literary work and its (the word's) meaning conceived as a hermetic (closed), self-sufficient whole	Work and its meaning conceived as an outcome of open, polyglot consciousness
Suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse	Deeply connected with mutual interaction with alien discourse.
Seeks passive or silent listeners	Seeks active, responsive and inquisitive listeners

Regarding the focus of novelistic discourse on active respondents, as outlined in the last row of the above-mentioned table, it is worthwhile to note Bakhtin's argument on the readers' understanding of the meaning of the language used. He says: "A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all; it is only the abstract aspect of meaning" which "does not contribute anything new to the word" (Bakhtin 2005). Hence, there will be "nothing new" in the discourse or the utterance of such passive respondents. On the other hand, an active understanding, with a "motivated agreement or disagreement," is what enlivens a discourse, which actually lives "on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (Bakhtin 2005). As an activating principle, response is regarded as a fundamental stimulus to interaction (dialogism). Bakhtin maintains:

It [the response] creates the ground for understanding; it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (Bakhtin 2005)

It goes without saying that the significance of language lies in the understanding of its meaning by the listeners or recipients. And the meaning can be best understood when the speech act (or speaker) provides as much room for interaction as possible. Actually, in practical life, no speaker would like to meet a situation where his or her words are left to wither away like the silent bubbles of water in the air. The words uttered are meant for active listening and understanding, and this is best achieved when there is enough curiosity and interaction or dialogue. According to Bakhtin, novelistic discourse anticipates such active listeners who can ensure the appropriate understanding of its meaning, and which achieves this by bringing together the voices and points of view of a diverse socio cultural world. He says:

It is precisely such an understanding that the speaker counts on. Therefore his orientation toward the listener is an orientation towards a specific conceptual horizon, towards the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another. (Bakhtin 2005)

### NOVEL AS ART

According to Bakhtin, what makes the novel artistic is the very representation of heteroglossia with all its social and historical voices richly abounding in the languages used by the author. He argues that the nature of language or communication is such where "the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity" (Bakhtin 2005). He says that the dialogic orientation of a word among other words "creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse....the potential for a distinctive art of prose which has found its fullest and deepest expression in the novel" (Bakhtin 2005). To those who valued only poetry as the artistic genre, he gently reminds of the lapses the poetic genre entailed:

In the majority of poetic genres (poetic in the narrow sense), as we have said, the internal dialogization of a discourse is not put to artistic use, it does not enter into the work's "aesthetic object," and is artificially extinguished in poetic discourse. In the novel, however, this internal dialogization becomes one of the most fundamental aspects of prose style and undergoes a specific artistic elaboration. (Bakhtin 2005)

Regarding the position of author in a novelistic discourse, Bakhtin says that the author "participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with almost no direct language of his own" (Bakhtin 2005). And explaining how the language represents the voice of heteroglossia, he says that the "language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically inter-animate each other" and that "it is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language" (Bakhtin 2005). While Bakhtin sees in novelistic discourse many heterogeneous factors at work, Bakhtin considers *laughter* and *polyglossia* as the two most important ones. The fact that these factors helped to elevate the forms of representing the everyday language in prose—the novelistic discourse—to new artistic level, is sufficiently explained through the following lines:

The most ancient forms of representing language were organized by laughter—these were originally nothing more than the ridiculing of another's language and another's direct discourse. Polyglossia and *inter-animation of languages* associated with it elevated these forms to a new artistic and ideological level, which made possible the genre of the novel" (Bakhtin 2005).

### LAWRENCE'S DEFENSE

In his well-known essay "Why the Novel Matters," which was first published posthumously in 1936 (Enright and Chickera 1989), DH Lawrence (1885-1930), one of the most celebrated novelists of the twentieth century, argues that the worth of the novel as a literary genre lies in its quality of representing the wholeness of life, or life in its totality rather than in fragments. He regards the novel as the "book of life." He says, books are not life but only "tremulations on the either." "But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book-tremulation can do" (Lawrence 1989).

Lawrence's concept of life, or the state of being alive, can be compared to Bakhtin's concept of active responses or active understanding through the process of interactive, polyglot dialogism. Only, the former is more concerned with action rather than language or verbal utterances. Nevertheless, he is fully aware that the language is the medium to demonstrate the action that is very important in life. And the novel is just the best medium. To be alive is to live actively, with full sense of existence. Passivity is just like death, lifeless. He says:

To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point. And at its best, the novel, and the novel supremely, can help you. It can help you not to be dead man in life. So much of a man walks about dead and a carcass in the street and house, today: so much of women is merely dead. Like a pianoforte with half the notes mute" (Lawrence 1989).

The value of heteroglossia is equally recognized by Lawrence. In life, everything deserves a full play, and according to him, "only in the novel are *all* things given full play, or at least, they may be given full play," with a realization that "life itself, not inert safety, is the reason for living." "For out of the full play of all things emerges the only thing that is anything, the wholeness of a man, the wholeness of a woman, man alive and live woman" (Lawrence 1989).

### CONCLUSION

Thus, traditional stylistics and contemporary literary scholarship does not recognize novel as artistic genre, Bakhtin and Lawrence have testified that novelistic discourse has also its own artistic quality, with scope to deal with social reality better and in a much wider way. While Bakhtin sees in the language of the novel (and other prose arts) an "ideologically saturated system of interaction," capable of forming a "worldview ensuring maximum mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life," Lawrence argues that the worth of the novel as a literary genre lies in its quality of representing the wholeness of life, or life in its totality rather than in fragments. Bakhtin's appreciation of novelistic discourse as something that enabled the "representation of heteroglossia with all its social and

historical voices....," and Lawrence's description of the novel as the "book of life" are both equally potent scholarly defenses establishing the novel as a form of art.

**WORKS CITED**

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2005. Discourse in the Novel. Pages 393-420 in B. Pandey (editor). *Intellectual History Reader a Critical Introduction*.
- , 2005. From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse. Pages 123-154 in Lodge (editor). *Modern Criticism and Theory*.
- Enright, D. J. and De Chikera. (editors). 1989. *English Critical Texts*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Lawrence, D.H. 1989. Why the Novel Matters. Pages 286-292 in Enright and Chikera (editors), *English Critical Texts*.
- Lodge, David and Nigel Wood. 2005. *Modern Criticism and Theory*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Pearson Education, Delhi.
- Pandey, Beerendra (editor) .2005. *Intellectual History Reader a Critical Introduction*. MK Publishers, Kathmandu.