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A Critique of Mikhail Bakhtin's "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse"

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Abstract

The essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (1940) is one of the noteworthy essays ever written by Mikhail Bakhtin. The essay talks about the genre 'novel' in general. The novel according to him is such a category which has distinguished features as well as vastly larger varieties and territories. For him, novel is more a force than genre. He has expressed his view about novel's 'novelness' in his present essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." He re-emphasized that the novelistic word arose and developed not as a result of narrow literary struggle among tendencies, style, abstract world-views-but rather in a complex century's long struggle of cultures and languages. It is connected with major shift and crises in the fate of various European languages and the speech life of people and not mere literary style.

Keywords

Discourse; Novelness; Heteroglossia; Polyglossia; Trilingulism.

Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), one of the 20th century renowned philosophers and reputed theorists, contributed in various branches of knowledge such as philosophy, linguistic, cultural studies and postmodern literary theories. It would be no exaggeration to call him distinguished thinker. As a thinker he has presented his own views on various aspects of studies. For instance, according to him “nothing is either inferior or superior to anybody; only the way of seeking truth is different.” He maintained that “the form and meaning of language are constantly shaped and guided by history and culture”. He wanted to show that history and culture plays very crucial role in giving birth and shape to the language. Besides this, he has also coined or invented certain terms or concepts such as “heteroglossia” meaning co-existence of different verities within a single code. “Dialogism,” meaning acting and reacting to a particular point in time and space. From all this it is clear that his contribution as theorist and thinker is noteworthy and remarkable.

Dialogic Imagination, a collection of four essays ever produced by Bakhtin, reveals his contribution. The essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” (1940) is one of the noteworthy essays ever written by Bakhtin. The essay deals with the genre ‘novel’ in general. The novel according to him is such a category which has distinguished features as well as vastly larger varieties and territories. For him novel is more a force than genre. He has expressed his view about novel’s “novelness” in general. In 19th century the form novel became increasingly popular, but unfortunately it has not been given importance as an area of study.

Bakhtin’s Idea of Novelist Image

The importance of the novel as a literary genre remains in the use of image or imagery. Generally critics analyse novel from the concepts, norms and ideas

of poetic imagery in general. It has many images, but these novelistic images share the dialogic relation with the readers while the poetic images have the single dimension so cannot be treated as a complete whole from the view of novelistic discourse. Secondly, images used in the poems are time and space bound whereas the images used in the novel are not restricted to any time or space limit. To a greater or lesser extent, every novel is a dialogized system made up of the image of languages. Language in the novel not only represents but itself serves as the object of representation. Thus, the basic tasks for the stylistics in the novel according to Bakhtin are as follows:

1. The study of the specific images of style and language.
2. The organization of the images.
3. Typology of the images.
4. Combination of images and language within the novelistic whole.
5. Their dialogical interrelationship.

Superiority of Novel over Poetry

According to Bakhtin, poetry has always functioned on an aesthetic level. He compares poetry with painting that hang on the wall like a decorative piece. On the contrary, novel has positive qualities. As it is socially and historically specific form of language use, it gets closer to the language used in journalism, ethics, and politics. In short, novel is more oriented towards the social and historical forms; while poetry focuses primarily on aesthetics concerns and can be considered only secondary at the social existence. In the case of epic, tragedy, and lyric the readers are exposed to limited expressions or experiences of life. In other words these classical forms of literature present one sided, limited, dimensional side of life which Bakhtin terms as 'Monoglossia'. While novel has variety of dimensions to which he terms as 'Polyglossia'. While the term 'Heteroglossia' referring the varied of explanations and novelty regarding forms of the novel. Thus, according to Bakhtin these factors make novel form different from the rhetorical forms and make it distinctive.

Logical Arguments of Bakhtin about the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse

Novel, according to him, is the reduced size of history. It is a branch of philosophy which explores the philosophical problems surrounding the theory. Bakhtin shows that the novel is well suited to the post-industrial civilization in which we live, because it flourishes varieties of thoughts and ideas. The essay is divided into main three parts. In the first part of the essay Bakhtin has stressed that the novel during 17th and 18th century was not recognized as an independent form of literature. It concentrates on five different stylistic approaches:

- 1) Use of direct words by author.
- 2) Neutral linguistic description.
- 3) Introduction of literary tendencies such as Romanticism, Naturalism, and Impressionism etc.
- 4) Author's personality to analyze the language.
- 5) The novel is viewed as rhetorical genre.

He further compares the novel with all other forms of literature. In novel "poetic Imaging" is used but not to a great extent as in the other forms of literature. In novel the author could express his ideas and observation only with the help of "language." Conversation remains as the fundamental constitutive element of all novelistic style as well as controlling image. Therefore, there is no unity in the language, the author's comment can be found at any of the novel's language level. It shows that literary language is not represented precisely but a mixture is found, as compared to that of other forms of literature. Therefore, author's language is used in the novel. During the initial part, only two factors of the novels were considered. They are 'laughter' and 'Polyglossia.' These two factors in the prehistory of the novelistic discourse are the subjects of study in the present essay.

In the second part of the essay, Bakhtin maintained that how the various factors from ancient time paved the way for giving independent identity to the

novel. Parody, according to him, is one of the ancient ‘direct word’ methods, which was used in poetry. A parody may represent and ridicule the features of the sonnets. It is also used in periodic epic. He says that Homer in his “War between the Mice and the Frogs” has used parody. Therefore, periodic travesty, that is comic and serious treatment together in a text which was found in Roman Literature. The language broke through the grim atmosphere of seriousness of the middle ages to produce the work, as a part of Renaissance in literature. For this reason Roman literature which was identified as low literature created immense number of periodic-travesty forms. They provided satires, epigrams, table talks, folk arts etc. It was, therefore, Rome that taught European culture, how to laugh and ridicule. Therefore, it is a shift from parody to periodic-travesty played key role in giving shape to novel, rather it is shift from language to style, style to parody and parody to periodic-travesty. Therefore, language itself serves as a means of the direct expression. In this new context the “Image of language” or image becomes direct word. So, language, parody dialogic, scene from everyday life, humor etc. brought together in the novel, and Bakhtin calls it “Heteroglossia” which makes the novel whole.

It is not one language but many languages come together and form a single language, Bakhtin calls it “Polyglossia.” For instance Greek and Latin contribute a lot in the term “Polyglossia” such diversity or hybridization is influencing in the growth of novel. Even the Roman Literature at the outset was characterized by trilinguism. This Polyglossia is also called interlamination. The interlamination of major national languages like Latin and Greek can be seen. Therefore, the speech diversity within languages, thus, has primary importance for the novel.

In the third and final part of the essay, Mikhail Bakhtin talks about stylistic problems during Hellenistic period. It was the problem of quotations. The quotations varied sometimes directly half hidden and sometimes directly fully hidden. The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own

speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused. On the other hand the role of parody in middle age was extremely important, but in modern time the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive and parody has grown sickly. It paved the way for a new literary and linguistic consciousness as well as for the great Renaissance of the novel. The important people such as “Rabelais and Cervantes” laid the foundation for the novelistic world.

Conclusion

While concluding, the writer says that primarily the familiar strata of folk language that played such an enormous role in the formulation of novelistic discourse and composition of the novel as a genre. He re-emphasizes that the novelistic world arose and developed not as a result of narrow literary struggle among tendencies, style, abstract world-views-but rather in a complex centuries’ long struggle of cultures and languages. It is connected with major shift and crises in the fate of various European languages and the speech life of people and not mere literary style.

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