Dialogic Poetics: A Bakhtinian Analysis of Rococo and Other Poems (2010)

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ABSTRACT
In South Asia, the aftermaths of colonialism and civil wars generate fragmented socio-cultural and political discourse that is the key feature of postmodernism. This paper investigates the poetry collection Rococo and Other Poems (2010) in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism. It aims at examining the text as a product of the context in which it is written as Bakhtin places texts within history and society which are themselves seen as texts that a writer goes through and within which he places himself by rewriting them. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia exhibits the interplay among social dialects, professional jargons, and language of socio-political purposes that provides multiplicity of meaning in a text. This heteroglossic paradigm dismantles the hostility for 'theory' that may seem 'a case of spreading habit' to some critics while interpreting a text. The findings inspect how Bakhtin's theory assists to decode the text of Rococo and Other Poems (2010) as a creation of postmodernism and postcolonialism which add to the multiple layers of meaning through dialogic discourse by not taking the readers too far from the objects of this research. Since the selected text is a translated work so it also celebrates the consideration for translated works. The textual analysis of the primary text with secondary sources (interviews, internet sources, personal views, biography, articles and author's other works) is conducted to explore how colonialism and civil wars in South Asia transform modern subjects into socio-politically fragmented identities who constitute their multilayered context in Rococo and Other Poems (2010).

Key Words: Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Discourse, Rococo and Other Poems

Introduction
Afzal Ahmed Syed (1946-present) is a contemporary translator, poet, writer, entomologist and a professor in Karachi with a mastery of both classic and modern Urdu poetic expression. Rococo and Other Poems (Farooqi 2010) by Afzal Ahmed Syed is a collection of prose poems that is translated by a Pakistani-Canadian author, translator and storyteller Musharraf Ali Farooqi (1968). Rococo and Other Poems (2010) unfolds many historical, political and cultural references that not only represent a specific region but also discuss the human beings around the globe in wars, civil wars, colonialism, racism, anti-Nazi poetics, myths, nostalgia and much more. Syed's poems explore the multiple reasons and historical contexts that shape human experiences and memories of colonialism and modern disintegration.

The objectives of this research are collecting data on the relationship of text and context in order to form meanings with multiple connotations considering the author's viewpoint, interplay of text and contexts and reader's interpretation through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia in the existing modern literature of South Asia. Interpreted from the view of postmodern and postcolonial, Syed's poems weave a

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tapestry coloured in the patches of the postmodernist and postcolonial disintegration. The study also investigates the concession of context and the text with reader/researcher's own understanding to avail the importance of theory that allows the process of negotiation among contexts in meaning formation with a dialogic discourse within the domain of language employed. It also addresses the silence and anxiety of postmodern subjects who have gone through civil wars, violence of multiple kinds, disorientation of modern life style, social injustice, authoritarianism, political disruptions, postcolonial cultural maladjustments and existential crises. The conclusions are drawn by analyzing the process involved in the intersubjective nature of language in form of metaphors, symbolism and imagery in Rococo and Other Poems (2010) to find how these poems unearth the consequences and reflections of different backgrounds they are produced in while not ignoring their "shining reality" (194) and make some relevant recommendations.

Being a writer from Pakistan, Afzal Syed has contributed in Urdu literature exceptionally. He is also the first to translate Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his country. In his collection Rococo and Other Poems (2010) he carves the themes of anxiety, alienation, uncertainty and an utter disillusionment that question the grand narrative and ask for deeper glance over them. Colonialism brings a completely different and harsh perspective in human lives all over the world. Its consequences are far more influential, prominent and intriguing especially in South Asia. Afzal Syed has witnessed the Dhaka separation of 1971 and escaped Lebanese civil war as a student and then the 1985th civil war turmoil in Karachi, Pakistan. These elements of personal and collective alienation, fragmentation, complex harsh realities, uncertainty, suppression and silence, and pains of post-modern subjects along with those who have been the victim of colonialism are present in Syed's poetry. Thus this dissertation also attempts to decode the metaphors and images in the relevant context as part of meaning formation and interpretation.

Methodology

The selected poems of Afzal Ahmed Syed from Rococo and Other Poems (2010) have been selected for the analysis. The nature of this research is qualitative and textual analysis serves as an integral part of the methodology. Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism views each narrative as a dialogue interpreting multiple layers of meanings. Especially the concept of heteroglossia by Mikhail Bakhtin unfolds the metaphors and symbols in Syed's poetry which weaves the 'discourse' of nostalgia, injustice, marginalization, class differences, political upheavals, imperialism, humanism and trauma experiences of war in Rococo and other Poems.

Literature Review

The School of New Criticism puts much emphasis on Close Reading and formal aesthetic structure of art and literature to form meaning. Critics like John Crowe Ransom (1988-1974) and Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994) advocate for giving more importance to formal and regular stylistic structure of a text as Terry Eagleton observes in Literary Theory: An Introduction (1983), "under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language was intensified, condensed, twisted, telescoped, drawn out, turned on its head. It was language 'made strange'; and because of this estrangement, the everyday world was also suddenly made unfamiliar" (3). This self-contained determinism to extract meanings challenges the critique of those theorists who associate text with context while not forgetting the author's role and look at the philosophical and socio-cultural role of language as well. Critics from the New Criticism even protest that literary theory "gets in

between the reader and the work" (x). However, we cannot ignore the point that "we would not know what a 'literary work' was in the first place, or how we were to read it. Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own" (x). This allows the readers to go for a balanced approach while interpreting art that undoubtedly has its "shining reality" with it yet also works together with the theory. As no art is produced in a vacuum and every art has its unique aura thus there is a subtle participation needed to interpret art and literature of all those elements that contribute to expand the experience presented in any narrative.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian philosopher and literary critic who worked on the philosophy of ethics, language and literary theory has critiqued Formalists and worked on "the dialogic nature of language" that is "the intense interanimation (interaction) and struggle between one's own and another's word" (Leitch 1002). Bakhtin's theory invites an interplay of multiple elements to decode a text/art which encompasses different dispersed and many a times partly opposite viewpoints that come together to produce meanings. In his book Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton writes "all literary works… are form of ideology, they represent particular ways of perceiving reality" (170). Bakhtin's concept of Heteroglossia also presents the same paradigm which is based on intertextuality. It involves "The interplay [of living language] among its social dialects, class dialects, professional jargons, languages of generations and age groups and of passing fads" (Leitch 998). He includes the historical and social aspects of the art in which it is created that eventually becomes an active participant in meanings while reading. While New Critics confine the meaning to its structural components that also cannot be ignored as they carry their literary flavour and partly work as a tool to compose meanings but meanings are always more than author's intention and theory frees the meanings from a single aspect of authorial iron grasp. If the death of the author is the birth of the reader then an active interpretation cannot skip the multiple points of view in meaning construction and thus theory becomes the very medium to amalgamate other farfetched ideas. Nealon and Giroux comment on the need of theory in their book The Theory Toolbox that "theory might be better stated as "everything is suspicious." Everything comes from somewhere and functions in a particular context or set of contexts; there's no such thing as a "natural fact" (6). They also highlight the "active exchange of social discourse" that is the key element of Mikhail Bakhtin's Heteroglossia (3).

Analysis

Throughout his works, Syed investigates the themes of nostalgia, silence, memory, love, violence, injustice, marginalization, class differences, political upheavals, imperialism, humanism and experiences of suffering that echo especially in his collection Rococo and Other Poems (2010). It is a record of nostalgia both of his political and personal life. Syed is recognized for his experimental style of writing. With his three collections of prose poems and one of ghazals he also bags the complete Persian work of Mir Taqi Mir as a translator (Oxford 2013). His first poetry collection An Arrogated Past (1984) is a political critique that reflects his pain and agony that he experienced as a survivor of holocaust (Tribune 2015). Syed also witnessed the civil war in Dhaka in 1971 in and in Beirut from 1974 to 1976 when he was just a student. Syed's first poem was published when he was twenty eight years old and he recalls that period as "Before that, I was in incubation period". As Bakhtin's theory observes that a dialogue of language occurs "between any word and its object, between any word and the speaking subject, between any word and its active respondent(s)" (Leitch 999) so it serves as "languages that serve

the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour". Afzal's poem The Campaign to Introduce an Ice-Cream unfolds the socio-political aspect by exploring the theme of imperialism (14). He is in a direct dialogic position with his counter narrative with the imperialists and says, they brought "white boxes-on-wheels" and "they spoke the language of strawberry and vanilla" (14). The strategy to "educate" colonized ones is seen here through the use of "language". Interestingly, here both the "shining reality" of the art and the context come together and Afzal's pain as a colonized subject adds more authenticity to highlight the political connotation of the meaning. Andrea Lesic comments on Bakhtin in her article Behind Bakhtin: Russian Formalism and Kristeva's Intertextuality that in Bakhtin's domain, "the reader negotiates meaning by working with, between, and among already existing cultural signs".

In heteroglossia, "every utterance participates in the "unitary language" and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia". (Leitch 1009). These concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces are both found in Bakhtin's dialogism as a conflict. As noticed by Nealon and Giroux in The Theory Toolbox, these conflicts challenge "both the sovereignty of the author as well as that of the professional "expert" (19). Foucault also describes this in words like "it is precisely the "multiplicity of meanings" that, institutions saw as dangerous and sought to reduce." (19). Tzvetan Todorov comments on Bakhtin's work as "his ideas about dialogism have as a basis the notion that language itself represents the contradictions and conflicts of the society to which it belongs". (5). Afzal's renowned poem The Clay-mine is considered a representative poem for themes of colonial violence, forced labour, silence, love and humanism as liberating power and a fragmented epic that helplessly narrates the disoriented and tortured stories of postmodern subjects in South Asia (67). Here is a labour who works day and night tirelessly in the clay-mine and is never given appropriate wages and food despite working too hard. The mouthpiece voices multiple sufferings only by these unique metaphors of mine and worker. Syed writes "Who knows/of those grafted to my miscellaneous parts/how many have died in mine-collapses/for stealing clay/immolated". (67) It reminds of the world of Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness (1899) where the stealing of ivory suggests the deaths of African slaves.

The quest for identity is another important characteristic of postmodern and postcolonial man that can be highlighted through the assistance of employed theory. Throughout this poem, Syed keeps on yearning to have a choice and right to be a human being that has his own identity and other fundamental rights. The verses like "One day I shall construct of my choice a whole man/… One day a season comes when a seed must sprout" (68) convey the urge to be fully an accomplished human being who could live the life according to his own choices and dreams. In the same poem, silence of the subaltern speaks as loud as Syed expresses "I never spoke a word inside the clay-mine/nor without/I shall teach my whole man my language/and converse with him" (69). Ngugi wa Thiong captures that feeling in his book Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986) that "the bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the mean of the spiritual subjugation". (9). With reference to Norton Anthology, Bakhtin argues "language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary (1021). Thus Syed's composition uncovers the multiplicity of meanings yet is spoken by one mouthpiece. Deleuze says, "Thinking begins in provocation. Thinking begins in response; theory begins as action. (Giroux 8). The "action" part of a theory expands the conditions and experiences related to the context of a text and co-production and multiplicity of contexts make a text more readable and thus it attains the level of universality that has both the

aura i.e. shining reality and relatability.

Mikhail Bakhtin explains discourse as the most vital part of his theory which is always present in a language. He utters "the internal politics of style (how the elements are put together) is determined by its external politics (its relationship to alien discourse). Discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context (Leitch 1017). The alien part allows the space to add the multiple and different viewpoints that can exist in the same language and can be spotted through diverse theories which provide a decentralized capacity to meaning formation. Julia Kristeva who is influenced by Bakhtin's dialogism, also presents the same concept of alien context in terms of Semiotics and Chora that remain mysterious, unintelligible, and unsignifiable and that the eruption of the semiotic within the symbolic is what provides the creative and innovative impulse of modern poetic language. (Leitch 1940) She further argues that artistic practice is capable of transgressing the thetic boundary between the symbolic and the semiotic, fractures and disrupts established modes of signification and thus creates an opening for new, polyvalent cultural meanings (Interview 1996).

Afzal Syed's many poems expose different harsh images and metaphors for attacking back the political authorities. His dexterity of using animal and surreal imagery leaves a pinching impact on the readers. Having experienced the couple of wars and a narrow escape from death and then the homecoming in Karachi meanwhile observing the 1985th turmoil and violence made Afzal Syed a complete epitome of postmodernism. Like Eliot's The Waste Land (1992), he painted everything on his canvas whatever he could just to put his own discourse as a counter force to authorities. His poem To Live is a Mechanistic Torture narrates a tale of unending sorrows of the people of Pakistan. He writes "To live is a mechanistic torture/We can realize why/girls who commit suicide/cutting open their vaginas/leave no farewell note… And how the bones of children flex/Like a tree's green bough /This tree is native to Pakistan" (39).

Conclusion

Through this analysis it is observed that theory is not always a complete toolbox or a package that can extract the authentic perspective or the intended angle out of a text neither they are only the stylistic features that enhance the shining reality of an art piece. The redundancy of each can hide the meaning and both are also not such outside elements which can be ignored while forming a meaning in a text. This paradoxical co-ordination of theory and structure of a text seem a matter of interdependency that could expose both the critical and creative side of a text. A careful, suitable and relevant selection of a theory can even shape the text and provide it new exegesis that can broaden the scope of a text, context and thus of the author's reputation as a universal appeal. However, each text has its own kind of aura and shining reality which work for the specific purposes of representation. The analysis of this paper reveals that the metaphors and symbols in Afzal's poem represent the context in which they are produced. Additionally, the co-ordination of both the theory of Dialogism and text Rococo and Other Poems creates the privilege to interpret poems in maximum capacity that involve both the semiotic and the symbolic beauties simultaneously. In this way, reading can become a privileged metaphor for perception or experience itself.

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