

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE IN BAKHTINIAN VIEW

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### Abstract:

*In Literary Theory, the concept of 'Discourse' has already been defined in many ways. For Michael Foucault, it was associated with thinking and producing meaning. And it is a way for controlling and exploiting colonized mind for the Post-colonial critics. But it was Bakhtin who studied language not only as a tool of power or dominance, but also as a means of exploring multiple perspectives in language. He studied language as a social phenomenon. He also tried to explore all the hidden centripetal and centrifugal forces in language. This can be possible when language is considered as dialogue. The word 'Dialogue', which includes the role of Speaker and Listener actively, means exchanging ideas. It is an interactive process in which multiple perspectives are hidden. Bakhtin called it 'Dialogism'. He explored it in novelistic discourse. For him such interaction is possible more in novel because it is associated with the centripetal and centrifugal forces of society. It is argued in this paper that autobiographical discourse can also be dialogic by considering narration technique of autobiography.*

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Dialogism, Novelistic Discourse, Heteroglossia, Dalit Autobiography, Parody etc.

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### Introduction:

Mikhail Bakhtin a renowned Russian linguist studied language radically with its socio-cultural aspects. He argued that the origin of language is with dualism. Here, for Bakhtin, dualism means not only two perspectives but multi-perspectives. He termed this complex concept as a 'dialogism'. To simplify the concept it can be studied with two basic aspects. First 'language as a social phenomenon' and second 'language as a dialogue'. Foremost, he examined language with its all social, political, emotional and material features. In a book 'Marxism and philosophy of language' written by V. N. Volosinov (it had been argued that Volosinov was Bakhtin himself) language has two basic elements i.e. 'sign' and 'ideology'. Sign and ideology are interconnected to each other. Whenever sign is present; ideology is present. Every sign has semiotic value. Any physical object converted into sign is displayed in the form of image or symbol. It represents reality. But Volosinov goes ahead and says that 'a sign does not simply exist as a part of reality – it reflects and refracts another reality'.<sup>1</sup> The following example will expound it in details, i.e. Rose, a physical image is converted into a

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<sup>1</sup> (Volosinov)

sign which displays an image. It consumes a reality but that image of rose reflects and refracts another reality when it represents love in a love story or a loved poem without losing its pre-existence. Further, he explored ideology which is connected to individual consciousness. Everyone looks at the world from their own position. The world is different in everybody's mind. This ideological chain stretches from individual consciousness to individual consciousness and connects them together. Sign emerges, after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another.<sup>2</sup> The process of interaction can successfully be executed through dialogue.

The second important feature to study in dialogism is 'dialogue'. Dialogue has a potential of interaction. Michael Holquist explores the word dialogue as a synonym for conversation: the word suggests two people talking to each other.<sup>3</sup> But for Bakhtin it is not only an activity of talking with each other but along with this it is about individual existence on ideological base, the space and time it utilizes at the time of talking, most importantly the differences between self and other still remain. His dualism is purely about ideological differences which leads to multi-perspectives. It can be expected through dialogue only. Therefore he states that language is dialogic when it is considered as dialogue.

Bakhtin studied novel as a dialogue. And he also observed the stylistics of novel as genre. It is argued that novel as a genre has potential to be dialogic. Certain reasons of the stylistics had been provided by Bakhtin. He examined the narrative style of the novel and poetry. The stylistics of poetry is purely monologic because a single voice dominates in a whole poem. But the stylistics of novel is different. The narrative of novelistic discourse is a combination of various voices and languages. Although the novel is written by an author but it doesn't mean he is telling his own story. It may not be his own language. Author has to develop a hero with his own language and limitations. In other words he has to present the freedom of characters. Bakhtin studies the language of every character and author. He also observes the individual consciousness shaped in a novel. This is possible because of narrative style of novel. Bakhtin also studied novel with its heteroglotic, polyphonic nature, utterance etc. which help the author and character to be dialogic in nature a novel.

In this paper, the autobiographical discourse is going to be explored from the Bakhtinian view. It has been argued that Bakhtin cannot be explained exactly. But by taking into considerations the parameters of novelistic discourse the autobiographical discourse may also have the potential to be dialogic.

### **What is autobiography as a genre?**

An Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary defines the word Autobiography as 'a story of a person's life which is written by the person himself' whereas New Webster's Dictionary of English Language defines it as 'biography or memoirs of a person's life written by himself'. Pascal Roy defines as 'it involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or a part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. Its center of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape'. All the definitions denote the account of personal but

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<sup>2</sup> (Volosinov)

<sup>3</sup> (Holquist)

autobiography also features some technical elements. Philippe Lejeune, in a book 'On Autobiography', defines Autobiography as 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality'. The definition allows us to think on the technical aspect of writing an autobiography. Herein, the first element is the form of writing which has been used for writing an autobiography is prose narration, which is absolutely homogeneous to the features of novel. The second element is that autobiography treats author himself as a subject. Although he is writing an autobiography he is unable to write everything about his life. He has to select some events of his life. And at the same time, he needs to keep in mind what exactly he has to say through his story or an autobiography. Third element as per the definition of Philippe Lejeune is that the author and narrator are identical. And last one is about the position of the narrator. The definition of Philippe Lejeune explains all the technical aspects of autobiography as a genre.

### **An autobiography as a piece of social phenomenon :**

Initially, an autobiography seems to us a story of details of the personal life of the author but it is the perception of socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-historical aspects of his life through which he shapes his own identity and meaning to his life. An autobiography is based purely on factual incidents, it is a description of his existence created in a society. His self-realization emerges from society. Everyone on this earth has different realization of world. Einstein's theory of 'relativity of simultaneity' with the example of train explains it well. To make it more clear, we can unfold it with a detail example. In Physics, it is said that there is no absolute sense in the event though it happens at the same time for two observer. When a train is passing from point A to B and there is a passenger (first observer) in a train at the same time there is (second) an observer outside the train looking at the train the realization for both of them is different because of the speed of light. Suppose, a man in the train is catching a ball in a train for him that ball is going up and coming down in a vertical line but for the observer who is outside the train the ball goes up at point A and comes down at point B in a curve line. With this example Holquist explains that dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and bodies of ideas in general (ideologies). Such picture is found in social reality which is reflected in autobiography well.

An autobiography is a journey of achievement throughout the life for some people who get a good social life but it can be defined for Dalits as a narrative of sufferings or pain. It is because of social realization of different person at different place of his life is different. The meaning of life is generated through social time and space. In Dalit autobiography we find the images related to marginalized caste-based life, it is the reflection of marginalization on the basis of caste system which works in India. For example, 'Baluta' an autobiography written by Daya Pawar is about his dalit life but when we go through 'The Outcaste' (in Marathi 'Akkarmashi', a kind of curse, written by Sharankumar Limbale) is also about dalit life. But when we compare Limbale's life with the life of Daya Pawar it seems that the life of Sharankumar Limbale is worse. It is due to social variety at different positions. And autobiography is a replica of this variety therefore it can be said that an autobiography is a piece of social phenomenon.

### **Autobiography as a dialogue :**

Here, the word dialogue refers to Bakhtinian concept of dialogism. Dialogue, the word literally, signifies two way communication where two individual voices are shaping their meaning. Holquist cites in his book 'Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world', 'Bakhtin's literary studies, when taken together, constitutes a manifesto proclaiming a cohesive body of ideas about the nature of literature'<sup>4</sup>. For him literature is an artistic whole where various ideas are juxtaposed in a text. These ideas shape the individual consciousness of the character which leads to one of their voice. For Bakhtin, on the contrary, literary texts are utterances, words that cannot be divorced from particular subjects in specific situation. In other words, literature is another form of communication, and as such another form of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> It means literary text coexists with the social and cultural ideas at a particular time and space. The meaning of literary text is generated with all cultural associations that clings to the situation in the time and place. In that sense, Bakhtin studies place of author, and the characters. For him, a novel is a kind of dialogue between author and character, author and reader etc.

By keeping in mind all possible factors of above cited paragraph, it can be stated that an autobiography can also be dialogic when it is studied as a dialogue like a novel. Although an autobiography seems monologic in its form, it is closely associated with the dialogic elements. Because it is an outcome of social life. Though, author himself is a hero, still he has to treat himself as a subject which provides possible space to create dialogue between author and himself as a subject (hero). At the same time he can also communicate with his readers and characters. Though Autobiography is based on factual incidents, as per the technical aspect of narration, he has to select the events for getting a proper meaning to reach to a whole. By considering these social, cultural and political aspects it can be said that an autobiography can also be treated as a dialogue.

### **Narrative of an autobiography :**

In every genre the narrative technique plays a very important role. Narrative is the soul of a story. Narrative means a basic mechanism and procedure of a story-telling. Narrative can be defined as 'the 'story' as an actual sequence of events as they happen, whereas the 'plot' is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged, and presented in what we recognize as a narrative'<sup>6</sup>. The narrative form of autobiography is developed in the same way. It has been observed that the narrative of novel and autobiography is almost same. Bakhtin studies novelistic discourse not just in its structural development but along with this he examines when and where it (novel as a dialogue) occurs along with its social and ideological existence. This occurrence is between author and reader, author and character, author and his hero. Initially, autobiography seems monologic but while studying its narrative the possibility of dialogic reading increases. In the narration of autobiography plot is a backbone, which brings together the elements like selection of events, sequence of events with cause and effect technique. Although, an autobiography is written in the first person narration but it cannot get released from socio-cultural, socio-political ideas (ideologies). When he creates a dialogue with other

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<sup>4</sup> (Holquist)

<sup>5</sup> (Holquist)

<sup>6</sup> (Barry)

character he has to hear their voices. Sometime he parodies the dominant voices. Such multi-perspectives can be explored in autobiography because of narrative.

### **Constructing dialogic self- individual consciousness :**

For constructing dialogic self, Bakhtin observes the simultaneity and differences in a text. What Karcevskij is saying about language is essentially what Bakhtin is saying about reality: The self (the perceiver) and other (the perceived) exist not as separate entities, but as 'relations between two coordinates...each serving to differentiate other'.<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin calls these two coordinators as 'self and other'. 'Self' can get a complete meaning from the existence of 'Other'. Volosinov explains it as the individual consciousness shaping meaning with other individual consciousness in its spatial existence with differences and simultaneity.

The writing of autobiography is purely on factual basis where social forces are strongly reflected. To develop 'Self' in such writing an author has to make dialogue with all the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the time. An autobiography is reflection of social interaction. To develop a narrative form of an autobiography the author has to scrutinize all the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the society. Ultimately, these forces will help him to form his self. Generally, in Dalit autobiography the author is trapped in identity crisis, by the existence of dominant social and political forces. For example, in 'The Outcaste' (in Marathi 'Akkarmashi') Sharankumar Limbale continuously argues with so-called dominant forces but at the same time he fights with his own caste people who are not ready accept him as a dalit because his birth is illegitimate. It is only the result of the relation between two bodies existing simultaneously with their ideological differences.

### **Parody of historic language of society :**

Language has not been emerged today. It has a long history. The historical study of language shares many changes in words ideologically. Bakhtin studies these changes in the concept of 'parody'. Simply defines 'Parody' as an 'imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for the comic effect'. According to Bakhtin, parody develops ideological and stylistic pluralism which undermines the predominant ideas by revealing their conditionality. Parody, by its amusing feature, releases itself from the dominant notions.

Dalit autobiography would be best example of such parody. Dalit autobiography made revolutionary changes in the concept of autobiography. Before that autobiography was denoting the achievements in life but Dalit autobiography is called as narrative of pains. It changes language also- earlier autobiographies were written in the language of standard society and was used but dalit writers allow the language of daily use in their text. Ultimately, the language makes parody of the standard language while releasing them from the dominant notions of society and brings to the notice of readers their pains and suffering.

### **Heteroglossia in autobiography :**

Heteroglossia literally means 'a mixture of tongue', Bakhtin invoked the term to

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<sup>7</sup> (Holquist)



account for the social diversity of speech types.<sup>8</sup> Here Bakhtin makes these speech types by differentiating them on ideological basis. He observes various tongues in society and the ideological existence of all of them is different and clear. Bakhtin explores this mixture of tongue in Dostoevsky's novel. He remarks that with the help of author, narrator and character social diversity enters into a novel. On the basis of theoretical framework of heteroglossia, an autobiography can also be observed as heteroglotic. Autobiography is a true picture of society. Dalit autobiography, for example, scrutinizes such social diversity of speech types. In 'The Outcaste' the variety of speech type can be investigated. Certain examples can be noted through the language of teacher who teaches Sharankumar Limbale, middle class people of village, women characters especially outcaste women, and in Dalit people who are not ready to accept Sharankumar Limbale as a dalit because he is an outcaste for them too. The conflicts between Sharankumar Limbale and his father-in-law can be the best example of this.

### Conclusion :

Finally, to conclude it can be said first that according to Bakhtin language is basically dialogic because of its sociocultural and ideological roots. And the origin of autobiography specifically dalit autobiography is very closely connected with this. Second, by observing narrative style of autobiography it is similar to novelistic discourse. Third, particularly Dalit autobiography is a parody of socio-political notions of language which liberates the dominant convictions of people from superior community. And last, autobiography is a piece of social phenomenon and because of this the possibility of heteroglossia increases in dalit autobiography.

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