

POLYPHONY OF TONI MORRISON'S GOD HELP THE CHILD

Jihan Zayed (Ph.D and Shaista Maseeh (Ph.D)

Qassim Private Colleges, Humanities and Administration College, Buraidah, KSA

ABSTRACT: *The present paper adopts a qualitative approach for studying Toni Morrison's novel God Help the Child in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. According to this theory, it can be claimed that this novel is polyphonic (i.e., multi-voiced). Morrison's own voice has not come in the novel between reader and the story as her point of view is absent from the novel. Instead, many other stories are reverberating with too much human life as the novel is divided into four parts with each part divided into subparts. Each of these subparts has a character to say it.*

KEYWORDS: Mikhail Bakhtin, Toni Morrison, Dialogism, Polyphony, Heteroglossia, Literary theory

Literature, like all the art forms, has not been able to prove its disengagement from human life. It remains to be an observation and expression of society. The evolution of literary theories has formed a complex system of tools which can reveal the multiple layers in understanding literature. *Dialogism* is a literary theory which introduces an invaluable contribution to understanding the novel, as a literary genre. While poetry aimed for a unity of styles, or in its terms "voices", the novel did not aim to speak in the voice of the writer but to "co-articulate" a variety of voices representing the realities in each society (Ayers, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dialogism is a term meant to capture the relational nature of all texts. It shares two roots with the more commonly used *dialogue* (the Greek *dia* for through and *logos* for word) and concerns the way in which dialogue occurs within and across particular utterances (Koschmann, 1999). It relates particularly to Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal study of the European novel, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981, trans.) and his later work on culture and language, *Speech Genres* (1986, trans.). Bakhtin's position on the nature of language is that it is inherently "in dialogue" with something else: with other words and utterances as they have been used before (and will be used again) or with an eternally expected "other" on the receiving end of the utterance:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word. ... Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ... but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (Bakhtin, 1981; p. 294).

As a literary theorist, Bakhtin was centrally concerned with issues of language and its use. He examined how novelists like Dickens and Dostoevsky employed different voices – *polyphony* – in the development of their fictional works (Koschmann, 1999). This polyphony can be

described as a novelistic device - best captured in Dostoevsky's (1968) employment of "underground man's crystal palace" metaphor in which he highlights the ironic use of double-voiced-ness in text to convey philosophical ideas. For Dostoevsky, Bakhtin (1984) said that:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but not merged on the unity of event. p. 6

Expressed in terms of polyphony, Bakhtin's literary criticism emphasises the multivoices and interconnectedness of language, an approach that departs significantly from the formalism of much literary criticism prevalent in Russia in the early part of the twentieth century. For Bakhtin, meaning in language is generated through imaginative interplay, iteration and questioning; it lies not in a fixed linguistic structure, but, rather, in the spaces that open up within or outside of the structure, in a continuous re-generating process provoked by its essential dialogic nature. The dialogic imperative is thus "if an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1986; p.168). In this understanding, language is destabilised so that the essential meaning of any utterance or text is rejected in favour of a multiple, discursive view, which is not divorced from its socio-cultural context: "words, phrases, utterances... place themselves side by side in such a manner that their past contexts come together and interact in a momentary spark of meaning" (Vice, 1997: p.47 as quoted by Stenton, 2010).

Bakhtin demonstrated how the voices of others become woven into what we say, write, and think. The term *intertextuality* can be used to describe this property of all texts, spoken, inscribed, or otherwise performed. Bakhtin used the terms *polyphonous* and *multivocal* to describe text in which multiple voices can be discerned. Polyphony is one way, therefore, in which single utterances can be viewed and analyzed as dialogic. All utterances are dialogical because every utterance has (a) *responsivity*, that is, an utterance is a response to a situation or to somebody else's utterance and (b) *addressivity*, in other words, an utterance is addressed to somebody who has to do something with it. In other words, spoken and written language acquires meaning only through social usage. Meaning in a text does not stand on its own out of context and is not unaffected by the people who use it, rather it is socially constructed. The "other" enters into speech not only as an audience and interlocutor, but is also embedded *in* our every utterance (Yüksel, 2009).

Drawing on this inspiration, Bakhtin (1984) believed that freedom was only possible when people could "be a personality...which comes into collision...with accepted convention of any kind" (p 11- 12). As such there is always a loophole in speech which "accompanies the utterance like a shadow" (Bakhtin, 1969, p. 211) and holds potential for alternate meaning. For Bakhtin, though, absolute finalization represented the death of ideas.

Following his exile in 1930's, Bakhtin made a shift from ethical philosophy to philosophy of discourse. At this point he made a distinct shift away from Marxist origins, suggesting that true realism could not be found in science or the labour process, but instead through the bringing together of art and life – a further move away from the dialectics of his time. In this locale, Bakhtin believed it was possible to distance oneself from the immediate activity while

remaining focused on everyday acts, their orientation (achieved through paying attention to genre and voice) and their social and philosophical significance (White, 2014).

Our culture supplies us with various forms or "patternings," which Bakhtin (1986) describe as *social languages* and *speech genres*. The former allows for a classification of utterances on the basis of "particular groups of speakers" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 76), while the latter categorizes utterances on the basis of the settings within which the speech is produced. Bakhtin (1986) described speech genres in this way: Speech genres organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the first words; we predict a certain length and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end.

When we come to the novel as a literary genre, we can analyze Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* as an example of a polyphonic novel. That is, it can be safely claimed that *God Help the Child* is a multifarious, conforming to the Bakhtin's parameter of polyphony because of its narrative structure and style.

THE PLOT

God Help the Child comes as the eleventh novel of Toni Morrison, the Nobel-Prize-winning, Afro-American author. Yet, it is her first novel which is multi-focused and multi-themed. The title is adapted from American Jazz singer Billy Holiday's popular song, "God Help the Child." Without any coincidence, the plot sings a triumph song for people overcoming traumatic childhood. The story revolves around a twenty three-year-old, black lady, Lula Ann Bridewell. Her childhood met rough behavior by her mother, who was a light skinned lady, because she was, "Midnight Black," and nobody in her, "family anywhere near that color" p. 1. She even became the cause of her father's embarrassment, and he never touched his own daughter. She became the cause of her parents split because her father could never believe that his wife did not cheat upon him.

Inflicted by the stigma of having a blue black daughter, her mother's motherhood became dormant. She told Lula Ann to call her "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama." The mention of Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), becomes imperative here. Both Pecola and Lula Anna are loveless, black, neglected by family girls. The reason Sweetness provides for her sharp behavior to her daughter seems to be correct when viewed in context of the history of racial discrimination in America. Being a black girl meant to be handled bluntly in a hostile world. Sweetness wanted to equip Lula Ann to brace all hatred meant for blacks in a white society.

Lula Ann could bag a little love from her mother and hold of her hand for the first time in her life when she accuses Sofia Huxley, a black female teacher, of child sexual abuse, in the courtroom. Even the perspective and conduct of people around Lula Ann transform into better.

Unlike Pecola Breedlove, who goes mad in her pursuit of love and beauty, a grownup Lula Ann resuscitates herself from hatred of her world like a phoenix. She works hard and she becomes face of a popular cosmetic line; she is transformed into "Hershey's syrup" "from "licorice." On the advice of her designer, she shops only for white and begins to look like, "whipped cream and chocolate soufflé", and "panther in the snow." p.34. At one point, she says,

So I let the name calling, the bullying travel like poison . . . with no antibiotics available . . . I built up immunity [to name-calling and bullying] so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn't need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don't need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. . . . It's glory. p. 57

She drops Lula, Ann and Well from her name to be called Bride. This beautiful Bride is broken when her boyfriend Booker betrays her. In her trip to find confront him for his betrayal, she meets Steve and Evelyn, husband and wife, who help her when she collides her expensive car with a pole. She finally reaches north California where Booker lives with her aunt Queen Olive. After verbal and physical fight, and tragedy of Queen's death due to fire accident which devastates everything, Bride and Booker realize their emotional need for each other. They unite again. The novel ends with a positive note with Bride pregnant with Booker's child.

Morrison is a writer to whom stories come spontaneously. This is shown in *God Help the Child*. She has woven in this one tale of Bride many other stories that are reverberating with too much human life. The characters in Bride's life have their own pain, trauma, death, cheat, love, and losses. The action of this novel is made intense by these individual stories. One of those is of Booker's, the boyfriend of Bride. The reader comes to know about his past: His brother was abducted and killed after sexual assault. Booker could never let go the anguish of losing his loving brother. He carries the burden and loss of his brother's death since he was eight years. He tries different things in life but could never get normal. It is only by the help of his aunt Queen he decides to move in life.

Then, we read about Rain. She is a little girl who narrates his story to Bride. A victim of sexual abuse, Rain was thrown out of her house by her own mother when she bits a boy. Evelyn and Steve forcefully bring her home when they find her sitting in rain alone. But she was reluctant to leave. She says to Bride that she was "stolen" by Evelyn and Steve. Rain also hates her mother who forced her into child prostitution. She calls her family comprising Evelyn and Steve, a "fake family."

Sweetness, the mother of Bride, is a light skinned woman who hates her own black child. She wants to kill or give away Lula Ann to some orphanage. Later, she justifies her actions and conduct towards her child by saying:

She didn't know the world. There was no point in being tough or sassy even when you were right. Not in a world where you would be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you would be last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh or trick her. p. 41

Sofia Huxley, the black teacher sent to the prison by the testimony of Lula Ann, has her own gloomy colors of life. She becomes a tool or a game by an ignored black girl to get some love by her mother and the world. She is shocked by disbelief when Lula Ann points finger towards her in the crowded courtroom. Sofia's own experience in the prison has always been bitter because she was a culprit in child abuse case. She spends fifteen tears in the prison. Bride comes to meet her after her release to repair the wounds and make up for fifteen years. She thrashes Bride without any thought. She cries after that but feels released and relieved of her

own burden. There also comes a realization that, ". . . freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it" p. 70.

NOVEL'S POLYPHONIC STRUCTURE

God Help the Child is divided into four parts with each part divided into subparts. Each of these subparts has a character to say it. This has provided shift in point of view in the novel. Part one opens with the monologue of Sweetness and then by sequence come the turns of Bride, Brooklyn, Bride Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Bride and Sofia. Part two opens with Morrison's own resplendent voice followed by Sofia, again Morrison and then Rain. Part three belongs to Morrison alone. But Morrison's voice is not authoritative authorial but that of a narrator filling the gaps in narration. She comes as one of the indispensable narrators of the novel. Also she does not present the story with any objective reality as in polyphonic novels. Part four begins with Brooklyn and continues to Morrison and last Sweetness. Sweetness' monologues should not be taken here as over imposing single thought of a character but that of a voice leading other voices too in the text. Each subpart has a piece of story of novel in the narrator's way.

The absence of Morrison's voice as a narrator has led to the plurality of consciousness in the novel. Each character can see a reality different from another character. Even, the readers can understand the difference of perspective in each character. Each of these perspectives is important. It is only because there is no only ONE reality displayed and imposed by author. There are several realities conveyed by several voices of characters in the novel. This has brought, to use Bakhtin's term, *heteroglossia* in the novel. It is true that reality depends upon the perspective of the viewer.

The viewer then speaks that reality in his own individual voice as follows:

SWEETNESS AND BRIDE

Sweetness despises her own daughter since the day she was born. It is because she is, "light skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow. And so is Lula Ann's father" p.1. Sweetness could see people around her looking at Lula Ann with cold stare. But the fact remains that Sweetness is worried not for the lack of fairness in her daughter but the presence of blackness. Blackness is something to be avoided and scared of. The reason: discrimination. "It was hard enough just being a colored woman – even a high yellow one – trying to rent in a decent part of the city" p. 6. Sweetness knows what Lula Ann would have to go through being a black girl. She understands everything. She even says that:

Some of you probably think it's bad thing to group ourselves according to color . . . But how else can you avoid being spit on in a drugstore, shoving elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to have the whites have the whole side walk, charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers? Let alone all the name calling.
p.4

The statement of Malcolm X, the black leader, public speaker and human rights activist, and the founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964 in New York, is noteworthy here. He said, "a black woman attorney driving a Mercedes through Avenue Z in Brooklyn is

still a 'nigger bitch', two words which never go out of style" (Lord, 1994, p. 460). Sweetness had to keep in mind the difficulties for a black woman. This shaped her attitude for her little black girl. At one point she says, "I had to be strict . . . Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down . . . Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault" p. 7.

Lula Ann's recognition of the world around her was not experienced as her mother. As a girl, she failed to comprehend the behavior of her mother. She, "used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch" p. 31. She does not know that it was her mother's strategy to make her strong in a world extremely conscious of a man's skin color. When they go to court to testify against Sofia Huxley, nobody hugs Lula Ann, they just smiled at her. Lula Ann goes to extreme length to get the love she never received. She falsely testifies against Sofia in the courtroom. This move of her finally convicts Sofia of child sexual abuse. And after the trial, "Sweetness was kind of mother like" p. 32.

EVELYN AND RAIN

Rain is the emerald-eyed girl who finds Bride stuck in the crashed car, "Jaguar." Evelyn tells Bride that she and her husband had 'found' Rain drenched in rain alone on a wintry night. On being asked her name Rain jumped up and ran away. Since she was alone without any hope of shelter, they decide not to leave her. Steve forcefully locked her on the backseat of his car. She kept hollering in the car but they don't let her out. They dried, fed and cleaned her and tried to find out the house of Rain.

While Evelyn thinks that she rescued Rain from something terrible, Rain has a different opinion on this incidence of her rescue on a cold rainy night. She tells Bride that she was "stolen." Later Rain remembers Miss Bride as her close company, as her sister. She seems to be quiet discontent about her family comprising Steve and Evelyn. She calls it "fake." She also says that, "Evelyn is a good substitute mother but I'd rather have a sister like my black lady" p. 105.

SOFIA AND BRIDE

Sophia has a childhood tale like Bride. When she goes to her house for her mother's funeral, she stands in a corner for whole two hours as reliving the punishments she would often get as a child from her mother on trivial matters, as wetting the underwear and wrestling with neighbor's boy. But Sophia is a black woman and she faces the trials that life throws upon her as upon almost all black women. Therefore, later, she admits later that, "mommy's rule, her strict discipline helped me to survive in Decagon," p. 77 her prison.

Bride's testifying against Sophia comes from the untoward encumbrance that developed in several years of behavior that Bride received as Lula Ann. The trial of Sophia Huxley brings Lula Ann an opportunity to snatch some portions of love from the world especially from her mother. Pricked by the conscience she visits Sophia when the latter is released from prison after fifteen years. When Sophia learns that Bride came to compensate for her fifteen years, she cannot control her emotions and thrashes Bride as is she was battling the devil. Sophia stays strong for fifteen years, but this episode comes as a liberating force in her life that releases her from her shell of purported strength. She confesses

. . . that black girl did a favor. . . not the money she offered, but the gift that neither of us planned: the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able. p.77

This episode confirms Bakhtin's claim that a novel contains a variety of voices. One episode has different effects on characters and they speak according to those effects acquired by them.

CONCLUSION

God Help the Child articulates not the voice of Toni Morrison but of the characters present. The characters are set in a structure that they are able to speak their own version of reality without stamping it into the ultimate one. Therefore, we find that the narrative technique and the structure of novel have played a vital part in providing the novel a polyphonic structure. Ayers (2008) asserts that Bakhtin's account lends itself to the claim that the novel is a "democratic and liberating form" p.115. Morrison's novel is liberating in the sense that it has optimistic results, giving the message that, "that trauma can be overcome, scars can mutate into beauty spots, life can be remade." As Bakhtin, Toni Morrison confirms that truth is not fixed but varies according to perspective.

REFERENCES

- Ayres, (2008). *Literary Theory: Reintroduction*. New Delhi: Wiley India.
- Bakhtin, M. (1968). *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*, In M. Holquist (Ed.). Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, In C. Emerson (Ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (1985). A critique of Marxist Pologias. *Soviet Psychology*, 23(3), 213-220.
- (1986). Speech genres & other late essays, In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds.). Austin: University of Texas.
- (1990). *Art and Answerability*, In M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (Eds.). Austin, Texas: University of Texas.
- Koschmann, T. (1999). Toward a Dialogic Theory of Learning: Bakhtin's Contribution to Understanding Learning in Settings of Collaboration, *Computer Support for Collaborative Learning*: 308-313.
- Lord, A. (1994). Learning from 60's. In Soyini Madison (Ed.) *Woman that I am: The literature and culture of contemporary women of color*. New York: St Martin Press.
- Morrison, T. (2015). *God Help the Child*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Robson, L. (2015). *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison, Review: 'Innately Forgiving' [Online]. Available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11541648/God-Help-the-Child-by-Toni-Morrison.html>
- Stenton, A. (2010). *How Could a Dialogic Approach to Teaching Transform Students' learning? A Discussion with Reference to Medical Education*. School of Medicine, King's College London.

- White, J. (2009). *Bakhtinian Dialogism: A Philosophical and Methodological Route to Dialogue and Difference?* [Online]. Available: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.359.7435&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- White, E. J. (2014). Bakhtinian Dialogic and Vygotskian Dialectic: Compatibilities and Contradictions in the Classroom?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 46(3): 220-236.
- Wertsch, J. (1998). *Mind as Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yüksel, D. (2009). A Bakhtinian Understanding of Social Constructivism in Language Teaching. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 5(1): 1-19.