

Bakhtinian Ontology as Evidenced by Some Poetical Specimens in Farsi Language

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Abstract

This paper represents an attempt to explore Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas in the process of interpretation of some selected Farsi poems by a few contemporary Iranian poets. In so doing, the paper first seeks to cast a rapid glance at Bakhtin's era, which shaped his literary philosophical views; then it continues with a brief discussion of some of the characteristic features of his ideology, namely intertextuality, heteroglossia, dualism, and carnivalesque. While dealing with the pragmatic meaning of the poems, the theme of centripetal and the centrifugal forces of language was addressed in a bid to illustrate the fact how the poet by deviating from the conventional codes of language system, i.e. by estrangement, manages to convey his intentional meaning that would have otherwise ceased to fascinate the reader. Finally, the decontextualized rationality in order to highlight the significant role of voice in sociocultural approach, the legacy of *Vygotsky*, to the genesis of mind, which goes a long way in the interpretive process of poetry were discussed.

Key words: Bakhtin, Philosophy, Poem, Farsi Language

Introduction

Bakhtin and His World

Mikhail Bakhtin was born into a family hailing from the gentry in Orel, Russia on October 16, 1895. He spent his high school days in the two towns of Vilnius and Odessia, which were the crossroads of culture and languages. The father was a bank employee and because of his work exigencies the family had to take up lodging in several cities in Russia. Mikhail spent his childhood years first in Orel, then in Vilnius, and later in Odessia, where he finished his high school. In 1913, he was admitted to the Faculty of History and Psychology and a little after he moved to the University of Petersburg, where his

brother served as a professor of linguistics. In 1918, Bakhtin graduated from university and moved to Nevel, a city which was the venue of many great thinkers: Lev Pumpianisky, professor of philosophy, V. N. Voloshinov, musician, poet and linguist, M. V. Judina, the famous player on the piano, I. I. Sollertinsky, director of Leningrad Orchestra, B. M. Zubakin, the great archeologist, and M. I. Kagan, editor of Russian Encyclopedia. In an intellectual circle as such, Bakhtin flourished; he thought of himself more of a philosopher than a literary figure. In 1920, he moved to the city of Vitebsk, a center of great artists like El Lisitski, Malevich, and M. Chagal and a site of great scientific literary conferences.

While living in Vitebsk, Bakhtin married Elena A. Okolovic, who proved a very faithful companion until she died in 1971. In 1923, Bakhtin was afflicted by an illness which eventually resulted in the amputation one of his legs. In 1924, he returned to Leningrad, where he secured a job in an institute of historical studies and set to publishing his works ¹

Bakhtin's Works

Bakhtin's works were doomed to a catastrophic end – either they got lost or came to a grinding halt by his opponents. His paper *On the question of methodology of aesthetics in the written works* was due to be published in *Russki Sovremennik*, but the journal was cut dead by the Soviet government. Bakhtin's first great work – *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* appeared in 1929. The book reeked of the revolutionary idea of polyphony, but it was a flash in the pan as no sooner had it come out than it was proscribed by law and Bakhtin was deported to Kustanaj, a remote town in Kazakhstan, where he worked as a clerk for six years and many of his close friends were put to death by the Russian government in 1930. In 1937 Bakhtin finished writing a book entitled **Erziehung-roman**, which dealt with the position of the novel in the 18th century Germany. The book disappeared during the invasion of Russia by the Nazi army. Bakhtin, being a chain smoker, used the second manuscript of this work to roll up his cigarettes during the dark days of the Second World War. This implies to what extent Bakhtin was indiscrete towards his own works which carried many lofty ideas. Forced by his colleagues–V. Kozinov and B. Bocarov, Bakhtin consented to revealing the store in Saransk, infested by mice, where he had hidden his unpublished works and allowed his colleagues to go ahead with printing his works.

From 1940, until the end of the Second World War, Bakhtin lived in the suburb of

Moscow. In 1940, he finished writing his doctoral dissertation on Rebeleiz, a French satirist of the 18th century, but the opportunity to present it to the university doctoral committee never came up. The intellectuals in Moscow had split up into groups: one group sided with Bakhtin; the other group took up the opposing position and challenged his ideas. Many an emotional sessions, rankling with rage and rancour, was held and finally the government stepped in and turned down Bakhtin's dissertation – *Rebeleiz and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. The work sank into oblivion for years until it was published in 1965.

Bakhtin, at the invitation of a group of his colleagues, returned to Saransk from Moscow and was appointed as the Dean of Faculty of General Literature. In 1956, the same Faculty changed into university and Bakhtin headed the Department of Russian and World Literature. In 1961, Bakhtin, due to health problems, returned to Moscow for medical treatments and there spent his last days until he died on March 7th, 1975.

Bakhtin and the Novel

Bakhtin's theory of novel holds a lofty position in the epistemological realism. As of Bakhtin's era, the novel was given a short shrift and few literary figures agreed on the meaning of novel. Each of the following books, for example, **The Theory of the Novel** (Lukacs, 1920), **The Rise of the Novel** (I. Watt, 1957), **Toward the Sociology of the Novel** (R. Goldmann, 1964), and **Deceit, Desire, and the Novel** (R. Girard, 1961) opted for its own definition of the novel. There has been no systematic scholarly endeavour in the field as no one knew for sure its genesis. Bakhtin has the upper hand over the others because he managed to offer a definition of the novel that proved too recalcitrant to yield to downtrodden verbalism. The volatile nature of the novel, contrary to other genres which

boast of some clearly established distinctive features, makes it difficult for the literary scholar to trace the emergence and the development of the novel in history. The history, for instance, is not unlike the novel in that both deal more or less with social systems. The concern of the history is to expound the relationships existing between legal codes, religious beliefs, economic institutions, family structures, ... in order to account for the shaping and continuity of events in a human community, all of which fall within the legitimate domain of literature. The difference between these two fields is the fact that the history focuses not only on a coherent narration of events but also on the sequential order of events. However, the novel highlights the gap existing in the whatness and howness of the events and puts in relief the social, logical, narrative incongruities. This recalls to my mind Vygotsky's ² (1971) analysis of Ivan Bunin's (1870-1953) *Light Breathing*³, which is a true paragon of artistic creation, and which bears out the Bakhtinian definition of the novel. To satisfy the reader's curiosity, I may briefly say that Vygotsky (1971), in his attempt to prove that catharsis is the result of the conflict between the form and the matter, uses two key words – *disposition* and *composition* of events in the story/novel. Whereas the history is concerned with the disposition of events by its narrative style, the story/novel disrupts the linearity of events, composing them in an artistic fashion, like notes in music and steps in dance, in order to absorb the reader's attention in its language forms, hence appeal to his sense of beauty. One more distinctive feature between the novel and the history is that the language of the novel is not uniform; rather, it is a mixture of voices, the notion that is captured in *polyglossia*, Bakhtin uses the term *ranzorecivost* while discussing Pushkin's *Evgeni Onegin*, which is a versified account of various forms and ways of living of

Russian people, resonant with different voices, and replete with dialogic systems, images, styles, and types of consciousness. For Bakhtin, language is always ideological, imbued with the speaker's/writer's systems of beliefs, attitudes, and is dialogically based on the multiplicity and diversity of voices. It is interesting to note that while other literary genres put the language at the service of *form*, the novel seeks to put its form at the service of *language*. The novel, in its attempt to exhibit the diversity of its narration, is constantly experimenting with different forms and styles of expression. Therefore, it is legitimate to name the novel 'the super genre' that subsumes all other genres as well as non-literary linguistic forms (Bakhtin, 1990).

Bakhtin and Philosophy

Bakhtin is greatly influenced by Neo-Kantianism – a philosophical school which was prevalent in the beginning of the 19th century and was the revival of Kant's philosophical thinking. The attraction of Kant's thinking for Bakhtin is the dichotomy of the mind and the external world and the relation between these two. Previously, philosophers had taken up positions in either the rationalist camp or the experimental camp: Thinkers like Gottfried W. Leibniz had stressed the role of ideas, giving little value to the materialistic world; thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley stressed the role of empiricism, arguing that man is born with *tabula rasa* (blank sheet) which is later inscribed by the experiences received through senses. Kant believed that thought was the synthesis of 'sensibility' and 'understanding', the former was taken to mean perceptual experiences and the latter carried within itself the rationalist's interpretation of concepts.

Neo-Kantianism had its roots in the ideas of Herman Cohen (1842-1918), the founder of the Marburg School of

philosophy. Bakhtin was inspired by the propositions of this school in two important ways: 1) it sought to build a bridge between the traditional problems of philosophy and the new scientific discoveries, and 2) it put emphasis on unity and oneness. While Cohen was possessed with the idea of unity and tended toward rationalism, Bakhtin was inclined toward the other pole of Kant's synthesis – external world (the concept which has made a reappearance under different terminological guises—*social setting, script, plan, macro-structure, frame, scenario, schema* (see de Beaugrande, 1980)⁴. Bakhtin opted for Cohen's emphasis on process which of its nature is votatile, and which is underscored by his contemporary Russian thinkers: L. S. Vygotsky, A. A. Leontieve, and A. R. Luria, all of whom had a foot in both camps, but like Bakhtin, were committed to significant role of external, i.e. historical/sociocultural variables in shaping up man's mind.

Bakhtin and Poetry

The right at the outset would be admitted that nothing is found that Bakhtin discussing poetry. However, drawing on his literary theories, I venture to cast light on the English version of some of the poems in Farsi by a few contemporary Iranian poets in terms of the pragmatic meaning, intertextuality, otherness, and dialogic nature within the invented context by the poet.

Bakhti's insistence on the social nature of language makes it a battlefield for two contending forces: the *centripetal* and the *centrifugal* forces of language. While the centripetal force of language stands by the language system, observing the principle of one-to-one relationship between the sentence and its meaning, what is called 'the locutionary meaning' in linguistic parlance, the centrifugal force is concerned with language behavior whereby the speaker/writer expresses his/her meaning by putting language conventional code system to

particular creative uses within particular contexts, which is called the 'illocutionary/communicative' meaning of utterance. To put it differently, the centripetal force of language aims to bring all elements of language to one unitary center; the centrifugal force tends to push the elements away from one central point, i.e. one linguistic form takes on different functions and one language function/speech act is performed by different linguistic forms. The language of poetry owes the beauty of its expressions to the latter force, which favors dialogism, welcomes inventive contexts, and provides neologism and a miscellany of voices, languages, and styles.

It is better to end this induction to the selected Farsi poems with a reference to Michael Holquist's (1990) view in this regard:

At the heart of everything Bakhtin said ... [there is] an almost Manichean sense of opposition at a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and the centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere. This Zoroastrian clash is present in culture as well as in nature. ... The most complete and complex reflection of these forces is found in human language, and the best transcription language so understand is the novel (Introduction, p. xviii).

Here I would like to take up the trend of discussion by M. Holquist (1990), adding that the centrifugal forces of language are the most powerful and ubiquitous in poetry, determining the way we actually experience language as we use them in the realities of heteroglossia which is associated with polyphony and carnivalization. Heteroglossia [ranzorecivost], in Bakhtinian sense, is "a way of referring to the particular interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication" (1990, 'Introduction,' p. xix), between the 'reference rules', realized in sentences, and 'expression rules' enlivened as utterances through particular

contexts (Widdowson, 1991)⁵. Interestingly enough, the rules of expressions do not yield, like other artistic forms of creation, to codification, cannot be simulated, and cannot be taught. Art of its nature is unique, hence as ever on the pedestal of worship. Due to the centrifugal forces of language, poetry, too, does not lend itself to paraphrasing or translation—'Touch the bloom, it is gone'.

To put a finishing touch to this paper, I may add that Bakhtin, in his conception of multiplicity of meaning, comes to rub shoulders with some contemporary Western thinkers like Austin (*How to do things with words*, 1962)⁶, Searl (*Speech Acts*, 1969)⁷, and Grice (*Logic and Conversation*, 1975)⁸, who are basically concerned with the volatile relationship between *form* and *function*, bolstered by contextual variables. Bakhtin, indeed, carries the torch in blazing the trail by his initiative ideas in area of language use, originating in everyday speech and extending itself to literary language.

Specimens of Farsi Poems: A Kaleidoscope of Heteroglossia⁹

Below follows, for the interest of the scope of the paper, the English version of a few Farsi poems by contemporary Iranian poets. In these poems I hear the footsteps of Bakhtin, striking the notes of heteroglossia, polyglossia, and other's consciousness. The poet's words are often rejoinders in a hidden polemic between him and the other – 'a word with a sideward glance', called by Bakhtin; a word that is looking forward to an answer is indeed an answer itself.

A rhetorical device! The selected poems are generally reminiscent of David Lodge's (1990) distinction of *mimesis* and *diegesis*, the former represents action in the poet's words; the latter represents action in the imitated voices of the other characters.

My selection of Farsi poems, rendered into English by the present writer, tilts in favor of double-voiced discourse, which is

often termed differently such as 'double structure', 'hybrid construction', and 'heteroglossia', all expressing authorial intentions in a refracted way. Such discourse serves two speakers at the same time, expressing simultaneously two different intentions, two different voices, and two different meanings that are dialogically interrelated.

(1) *The Way to Meditation*

The poet: Mohammad Zohari

I asked somebody:

- "Where is the way to meditation?"

Asked he in surprise:

- "Which city do you come from?"

I answered:

- "From the city 'See it 'n never ask.'

Said he:

- "You're better off not to know the way to meditation."

(2) *The Fist in the Pocket* (excerpts)

The poet: Mohammad Zohari

2a. Now that the mast is broken

The sail is threaded

The swell is flattened

It is blue

As far as the eye can reach:

The sea is blue

The sky is blue

But

With blood is stained the deck.

2b. O you submerged in the ignoble lagoon

The apex of meanness is this:

To the ignoble you stuck,

To the ignoble

You bowed.

2c. The mountain communes with the mountain.

But you and I!

Behind the window of our larynx

The vocal chords

Are withered.

2d. I wrote from the right

You wrote from the left

We reached each other in the middle of the line.

- 2e. Mixed with the mud is the seed
 Vying for sprouting in the soil
 Seeking help from the water 'n the sun
 But alas!
 The land is sterile, covered with the salt.
- 2f. The dandelion stopped short and
 Hesitated
 Free though it was
 Dreaded it
 The plain all was stained with blood.
- 2g. Convicted I am for the sin
 Never have I committed
 I harassed no squirrel
 I picked no flowers
 I was kind-hearted even to the thistle
 But convicted I am
 No more to remain in the lap of this
 intimacy.
- 2h. There was no sky
 There was no land
 More despondent than our house
 If the sky is dark
 If the soil is sterile
 My sin is
 - We -
 Are resigned to the decree of God.
- 2i. The brakes were applied!
 With the screeching of the tyres
 The car came to a grinding halt
 So that a dog would leisurely cross the
 pass
 And he with a bomb
 Is raising fungi in the region where
 grows fist 'n outcry.
- 2j. The wind
 The cold wind,
 The overnight wind
 The root in the mud, the bough away
 from the soil
 The bough, covered with flowers,
 presages ripening fruit
 But the stem is hollow 'n dry vessel
 We, separated from each other, are
 struggling in vain.
- 2k. -"How is your spring? Said I
 -"We are the offspring of a dry land.
 Content with a violet if ever it comes up!

(3) *Good Trip to You*

The poet: M. R. Shafi'i Kadkani
 - "Where're you bound for so hastening?"
 The thistle asked the breeze.
 -"I feel fed up with this place,
 with the dust of this desert.
 Aren't you longing for a trip?"
 -"I'm all fraught with wishes, but
 Alas! I'm kept in fetters."
 -"Where're you bound so hastening?"
 -"To anywhere, but for this, that may be
 my abode."
 -"Have a good trip, but I swear you to
 friendship, would you please
 after you've traversed safely this desert
 of horror,
 to the blossoms, to the rain
 convey my greetings."

(4) *Overnight*

The poet: Ahmad Shamloo
 How can one write poetry overnight
 For it to speak of both my heart 'n my
 arm?
 Overnight
 How can one write such a poem?
 I am the same old ashes
 Within me lies the flame of all revolts
 I am the same quiet sea
 Within me lies the roaring of storms
 I am the same dark crypt
 Within me lies the fire of all creeds.

(5) *In the Rain*

The poet: Omran Salehi
 Hesitant I feel in my footsteps
 There a stone of warning
 Is telling me:
 "Poisonous are often the fungi!"

(6) *The Miracle*

The poet: J. Alizadeh (2014)
 On the hellish night of August
 Button up your lips and see
 The bright miracle of silence
 The wind,
 Despite its clamor,

Stopped short of taking
A handful of earth to the sky
But
The pool,
With its profound silence 'n clear water,
Brought down to the earth the sky

(7) *The Root and the Forest*

The poet: Siavash Kasra'i
I am a twig of the people forest
At the stroke of an axe
Many a memory I carry on the trunk of
my progeny
Stop talking to me of cleavage!
Never the word 'cleavage' is a wonder to us.
To us the wonder is blossoming in
spring.
Should I be dragged on the ground
hundred times?
Should the bones of mine fracture
hundred times?
When comes up the time of exigence
I am the log that blazing it gets
I am the root from it the forest sprouts.

(8) *The Dawn*

The poet: Hooshang Ebtehaj (1981)
Open wide the window now
I've run out of patience with the closed-
in night
The cock for some time has been
crowing in my neighbor's house.
The night glum 'n bitter
Is a drag in my heavy heart?
At the heart of this dark night for some
time
Behind this window wakeful 'n silent
I have remained fixed on the road with
my eyes.
I'm all ears, all eyes
Drunken with the charming song coming
soft
Enchanted by the nightly shining star
burning warm
Wondering at the curtain of the dawn
lightning up.
Yea! Open wide this window now

The morning is shining behind the
curtain dark
Reaches the cock's crowing from the
bloody dawn
Removing the derision off the mirror's
face of mine
The kiss of the sun is pouring sparks
onto my eyes
The smile of the day is coloring the tears
in my eyes.

(9) *Trepidation*

The poet: Hasan Honarmandi
The nights, like the wolves behind the
walls of the days,
Are slumbering still with their mouths
agape
Over my death the humming of my
bright days
Old heinous songs has composed again.
I fear your hastening o' the early evening
I fear your drag o' the belated morning
I fear the delay
I fear the haste.
Me, too, one night made my way to your
city o' the fancy
Me, too, wetted my lip out of your cup o'
the sin!
On the lip thousands of whimpers in the
quiet have died down
Of the night thousands of tales in the
glance have withered away.
I fear the dark of the painful nights
I fear the white of the hopeless dawns
I fear the dark
I fear the white.
I fear the glance died down in the
reticence
I fear the reticence died down in the
glance
I fear the reticence
I fear the glance
I fear the dawn
I fear the dark.

(10) *Another Man*

The poet: Nosrat Rahmani

You're coming and I 'm going, o' you
another man

Like the dark within the hairbreadth of
the morning

You're coming and I'm going, beautiful
it is, beautiful

The drizzle of the rain on the dust of a
pathway

The plain smitten with blight was
strangely parched

Like a filthy blister was on the plain
every mound

We burned, broke camp, 'n departed

Now to the sightseeing coming you are.

Many a *Hallaj danced on the gallows 'n
was gone

Carried the rod of divinity the Satan in
this burning plain

From the miserable bones set it up

The glorious ivory castle of the history
of the gone by

The blood-smudged coffin of mine is your
cradle

The filthy hand, the destiny, is rocking
you

Beware! It is all deceit, gloss, 'n scam

One day should you hear someone
saying: 'There is wisdom.'

You're coming and I'm going. Farewell
to you

Nothing we brought in, nothing we took
away

To live in vain is a bitter pain

But ... how pitiful it is to die in vain.

Houssein- ebn- Mansoor (922 A. D.),
famous mystic, who was put to cruel death
because of his crying out "I am the Truth"
in his spiritual trance.

Epilogue: Comments on the Poems

Bakhtin's philosophical stance constitutes
the core of *dialogism*, *otherness*, *hetero-
glossia*, all of which herald post-modernist
philosophical propositions. Bearing this in
mind, each of the poems given above can
be viewed differently in the spotlight of
Bakhtin's conception of meaning which is

created in the relation between two bodies:
the physical and the ideological, sign and
value, sentence and utterance, language
system and verbal behavior, reference rules
and expression rules, centripetal and
centrifugal forces of language, linguistically
variables and contextual variable. I wish I
could take up the poems given in this paper
one by one and offered my own reading of
them, but the limited scope of the paper
forces me to confine my interpretation to
making some general remarks on the
Bakhtinian lines, which, I think, hold true
about the poems all.

1) Each of the poems has created its own
particular context whereby certain poetical
features are crystallized.

2) Utterance, an inherent element of
dialogism, brings the addresser and the
addressee face-to-face in an act of
communication.

3) Almost all the poems pull the reader
deep down to the covert meanings which
the poet could not have dared to speak
openly because of political constraints.

4) The poems on the whole pivot on a
conflict/clash in a Zoroastrian sense. The
reader perceives the presence of the other,
becomes responsive, and takes a position in
the ongoing dialogue.

5) The poems generally speak of
transcendental values which are hard to find
in this mundane world. As such, they are
reactions against the choking politics of the
time.

6) Obviously, the poems refuse to stand by
the codes of the conventional language
system—inanimate objects take on animate
aspects, linearity is disrupted, certain
language forms performs different
communicative functions; indeed the
Gricean cooperative principles (Grice 1975)
appear to be in abeyance. These poetical
stunts empower the centrifugal force of
language, thus making way to heteroglossia.

7) In the poems cited above the content has
the upper hand over the form, though by no

means the latter is given the short shrift by the poet. One may say it is the content that engenders the form; the content blossoms out in the process of interactive message; it is in a constant state of formation and transformation; the notion which goes against the grain of formalist's predetermined communication and fixed transmission.

8) In order for the reader to appreciate intertextuality – the relationships between utterances in the poem, he cannot help remaining sensitive to dialogism, which is "a vision of the world and of truth" as is understood from Bakhtin philosophical position.

The word *dialogism* carries within it a notion of relativism; it represents an attempt to search for truth through *conversation*, which demands many voices and points of view. The reader of the poems will wise up to the characteristic feature of intertextuality if he finds his way to the situational context of the poem, to the dialogic version of truth, and more specifically, to the political milieu which had shaped the poet's world view and his value system.

9) The poems, on the whole, embody elements of *unofficial thought* and *unofficial language*, the former reeks of carnivalesque spirit; the latter is related to polyglossia. The poems bring tears to eyes and allow a smile to cross the face.

10) All in all, the poems are exponents of fear, outrage, and disillusion of the poet. The reader, with hindsight, cannot help coming to terms with the poet and feeling a strange empathy with him. The reader, while contemplating the poem, feels released of some unsavory emotions pent up in his heart. He is healed through the effect of catharsis, which, according to Vygotsky (1971)¹⁰, is the aesthetic function of all true arts.

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