

# Analysis of Polyphonic Style in *Disappearance*

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## ABSTRACT

As a polyphonic novel, *Disappearance* presents a magnificent panorama of the Guyana people after 1966 when they just won their independence from British colonial rule. Almost all the existing literature on this novel is extensive and focuses particularly on broad visions, e.g. colonial trauma, culture hegemony and so forth. However, no research has been conducted to highlight value of individuals and their significance against grand background. To fill this gap, the paper attempts to analyze it from a specific point of view, i.e. polyphonic style, derived from polyphony theory by Bakhtin. Using polyphonic style, *Disappearance* is studied in three dimensions: subjectivity, dialogue, and open-endedness. It concludes that, with polyphonic style as the method, *Disappearance* could be viewed from an exact perspective. Accordingly, individual value is highly emphasized and their significance is utterly appreciated.

**Keywords:** polyphonic style, subjectivity, dialogue, open-endedness

## I. INTRODUCTION

With independence from British colonial rule after 1966 as a grand background, *Disappearance* focused on Dunsmere with vivid and profound description. On one hand, it indicated tensions between colonial and anti-colonial powers; on the other hand, it implied confusion of human value and meaning of their existence. Generally speaking, previous studies on *Disappearance* could be classified into the following categories: the first category could be identified as general introductions, such as Qingsheng Yan [1], Minglu Cui [2]; the second critiques could be seen as "grand view" perspectives, i.e. colonial trauma [3], and culture hegemony [4]. These studies, to some extent, have achieved to demonstrate tensions and conflicts between the two powers; the last critiques refer to a stylistic view on *Disappearance*: thematic significance from perspective of literary stylistics [5], and stylistic feature [6]. These studies conducted have shown themes and stylistic feature more often from language techniques, say, vocabulary adapted, certain grammar, etc.

In essence, almost all the existing literature on *Disappearance* is extensive and focuses particularly on a broad vision of life and existence of people depicted in *Disappearance*. However, no research has been conducted to highlight value of individuals and their significance against such a grand background. This, in the eyes of the author, overweighs significance of massive images, since it emphasizes value of independent beings and thus offers a brand-new angle when human being and their inner needs are concerned.

Accordingly, this paper is divided into five major sections as follows: section one starts with introduction, which offers a general understanding of various interpretations related to *Disappearance* in previous literature; then, section two deals with its first feature observed in *Disappearance* via polyphonic style, i.e. subjectivity; section three develops on its second feature: dialogue; section four introduces the last style seen in it: open-endedness; finally, in section five, it concludes that with Bakhtin's polyphony theory, exactly its polyphonic style, readers are equipped with a good lens to comprehend *Disappearance* with totally different insight into individuals and their unique value and significance.

## II. SUBJECTIVITY

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin proposed "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" [7]. In which he means that authors of polyphonic novels are no longer the traditional ones that have a God view towards their characters depicted. Nevertheless, each of the characters is independent spiritually and not submissive as a product of their authors. Their personality and awareness is implied in conversations. This perspective differs considerably from the traditional novels in which characters and their consciousness are submissive to their authors and their consciousness, according to Bakhtin.

#### A. Paradox in different narration indicates subjectivity of the two parties involved

*Disappearance* starts with a black engineer in his tone and point of view, with a lot of people introduced: Swami, the one who worked in a construction site, Alfred, "my mother", my classmate Jamal, a preacher man, Mr. Leroy, my landlady Madam Rutherford, Christie, Professor Fenwick, Curtis, "my" little girlfriend Annette, etc. Unlike the traditional monologic novels, people's awareness in *Disappearance* was independent and not submissive to the author. For instance, concerning the affair between Madam Rutherford and Christie, the two parties involved had quite different narration: from Christie's standing, it was described that madam Rutherford came to him with a cup of tea and she bent over to hand it to him, at that very moment, Jack, her husband, had come home earlier than usual, screamed at her and even might hit her. Afterwards Jack came out and ordered Christie out of his property. Christie felt he never dared to affront her [8].

Whereas from Madam Rutherford's opinion, it was described quite differently that Christie was a bit of coward and his hand trembled when he was given his cup of tea. He was a poor thing that he dropped his saucer, trowel, packets of herb seeds, the lot, and ran [8].

The paradox in the above explanations makes it possible to see that subjectivity of characters in *Disappearance* is not manipulated by its author. What's more, each character has fully expressed their inner opinions and feelings and was not dependent on author's subjective purposes. They are "not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse"[7].

#### B. Subjectivity of Madam Rutherford and the others

Meanwhile, as another main character in *Disappearance*, Madam Rutherford was described quite a lot. Yet no matter she or Christie, both of them lived independently and thought independently, and could adequately express themselves. Though their opinions conflicted with one another from time to time, these conflicts coincidentally reflected that both had their own understanding and viewpoints of the world. These differences and paradoxes just implied their inner independence, and made it possible that the characters depicted were equal with their author spiritually, to the extent that, just like real life individuals who could enjoy independence and freedom. Yet, this degree of independence and freedom could never be expected in the traditional monologic novels. Therefore, in the polyphonic novels, the only sovereign power in the author decreases, and the uniqueness and authenticity in characters is achieved.

#### C. Subjectivity as free will

In the eyes of Ali Jamali Nesari [9], polyphony is viewed in a way that characters were permitted a great deal of freedom for interaction, and even argument could occur among them and even with their author. Thus interaction of different ideologies is allowed in polyphonic novels.

Subjectivity of human being could be connected to free will given. In fact, this is the real difference between human and animal world in that men are able to make decisions according to their will. For one thing, it is a most valuable present given and men are supposed to use it wisely; for another thing, subjectivity in human being means real respect for each other, and free will of individuals is highly concerned from the very beginning. For instance, just imagine how Adam gave names to all animals. It was exactly the time when he developed his thinking ability, language capacity and named all animals according to his preference, which undoubtedly indicated his subjectivity.

### III. DIALOGUE

In essence, the core of Bakhtin's polyphony theory lies in its dialogue: confrontation of people, or that of "me" and "others". There are two categories of this dialogue: dialogue among people; dialogue inside the depicted characters. In his opinion, "The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationship exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally" [7].

#### A. Dialogue as a way of living: connected to others

In *Disappearance*, "me" is a black engineer at the sea-dam spot. In "my" opinion, a considerable amount of people run into my life, and influenced me intensively.

People appeared in *Disappearance* fall into two categories: native Guyana people, i.e. the lower labor class; upper class men and women of Britain with a sense of superiority. Representatives of the former are Alfred, Jamal, even the worker Swami. There is an indescribably miserable fate about them: Swami died under the wheels of bulldozer; Alfred once had a moment of the most glorious in life, yet was entrapped into alcohol and fallen; Jamal was "my" childhood classmate, who denied unconventionally all about "my" circumvention on him. Later, he was valued highly by "our" teacher Mr. Leroy and became the beloved. Unfortunately, in the end, he collapsed all over in the evil mockery about his mother by classmates. While British upper class people referred to Madam Rutherford, Professor Fenwick, Curtis, Irish Christie, etc. They all had feelings that were complicated to be described. Especially my landlady Madam Rutherford,

who cared about my life, unexpectedly, criticized dark side of British colonialism. In some sense, she was "my" guidance spiritually; Professor Fenwick, my tutor, was a righteous man; Christie, the Irish worker on construction site, was sensitive about spirits and gods and also liked daydreaming like Alfred. It could be seen that throughout *Disappearance*, all these people and "I" were intertwined in many situations and "I" was converted mentally as well as spiritually, and having interactions, which constituted various dialogues throughout *Disappearance*.

#### *B. Dialogue as a weapon in hard times*

Again, According to Ali Jamali Nesari [9], as Bakhtin lived in Stalinist Russia, when freedom was deprived, and whatever the government said was the only truth. People could not say anything about it. With this situation to be faced with, Bakhtin, the one who initiated Bakhtin Circle, had figured out a way, i.e. dialogue to express themselves even in the hardest times.

Thus dialogue, according to Bakhtin, is profound reflection of factual men and their existence. In his mind, each man and woman is supposed to be valued and cherished. Each one is unique with individual significance, which is the basis for equal dialogue between people. Otherwise, if human is not viewed as being significant individual, especially when some people are seen as noble with independent value while others are not, there is no possibility of equal dialogue between them. In this sense, According to Zheng min Cheng, dialogue means a challenge to hierarchy, showing a deep concern for men and men's true value [10].

Bakhtin's polyphony theory was conceived at the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century when wars and technology developed, which made human beings insignificant in some sense. While with Bakhtin's academic research, it can be seen that he had something to deliver in his work and theory, i.e. he showed tremendous compassion for human and their inner feelings, and he cared for men, especially for their value; he was against the idea of ignoring men's special personality and significance. What's more, he assumed that everyone could make his/ her voice heard, understood and answered, which was basis of dialogue and polyphony theory [10].

#### *C. Dialogue as the built-in rights of human being*

At the very beginning, men were created with language ability, which enabled them to communicate with their peers. That's how men were destined. Accordingly, it could be seen that dialogue is a key factor in daily communication, whether with their peers or even themselves. Dialogue serves as the means to achieve self-realization for human being. Therefore,

dialogue makes a difference in life and shapes their true identities. What's more, dialogue is the very foundation in terms of Bakhtin's philosophy and aesthetics. In his opinion, the essence of life, thoughts, art and language was all contributed to dialogue. It was based on his reflections on dialogue that he explored essence of men and ways of men's existence [10].

What's more, Bakhtin was concerned with men's existence, and equal dialogue among people. Or to make it more precise, a Utopia with free and equal dialogue between people was what he expected [10]. Though not involved in fighting for truth with other intellectuals, Bakhtin mainly focused on academic research. It can be observed apparently from his academic research, especially from his dialogic nature, that he respected human value and pursued equality among people. All of these notions showed his disagreement with dictatorship and his concern about human existence.

### **IV. OPEN-ENDEDNESS**

Another feature of polyphony is its open-endedness, which is closely connected with subjectivity and dialogue. Based on Bakhtin's theory, Zheng min Cheng summarized that dialogue is open, not completed and unfinished. Meantime, in Bakhtin's opinion, existence means dialogue, and the ending of dialogue means the end of all. Yet, in real life setting, dialogue will never stop, and was not supposed to be.

#### *A. Open-endedness*

Then, where does that "open-endedness" come from? To Bakhtin, it lies in thoughts in everyone. In each of them, there is a "great and unresolved thought"; all of them must, before all else, "get a thought straight" and in this resolution of a thought, lies their entire real life and their own personal unfinalizability [7]. Accordingly, polyphonic novel, has a completely polyphonic ending, but precisely for that reason, from the ordinary (that is the monologic) point of view, the novel remained uncompleted" [7].

Concerning *Disappearance*, it is developed in two subtle dimensions: on one hand, it's about the black engineer damming the sea-dam; on the other hand, it's more about his intertwined destiny with a lot of people, and his reflections on significance of individuals and their value.

Though all the people depicted were once so dear to "me", everyone disappeared eventually. Even the sea dam, which was built with painstaking efforts, disappeared eventually, yet "my" thinking on life and its meaning never stopped. Just as Bakhtin assumed that thoughts were open, not completed and unfinalized. Or in other words, man's reflection on eternity never

decreased, as it was, is and will be a universal meditation for every living being with a spirit.

#### *B. Open-endedness means unfinalizability in real life setting*

In *Disappearance*, open-endedness is considerably apparent: after the event of basketball, Alfred decided to make a living with his sewing machine. However, he made "me" go out to watch the ocean for three days and then he talked a lot about gods. "I" was disappointed and left. Readers are not informed whether he was alive or not afterwards, making the whole story a mystery; "my" mother finally abandoned "my" father, but where he was going, no one could tell; "my" teacher Professor Fenwick was a hardworking man, yet my skeptical view towards his virtues was not explained further; and there was no clear description of the result between "me" and "my" little girlfriend Annet either.

There was no answer to all these confusions in *Disappearance*. Yet a broad vision and imagination was given to the readers to conceive. As a polyphonic novel, destinies of each character were entwined and mixed in a broad sense. The writer did not take pains to explain their ending specifically; at the same time, "my" journey to discover the meaning of life was not revealed. Consequently, every character was depicted in a detached manner, and judgment was dependent on readers. In Bakhtin's view, he saw polyphonic novels as the only genre without ending. As he once stated "Thus Dostoevsky's works contain no final, finalizing discourse that defines anything once and forever" [7].

#### *C. Open-endedness implies infinity of human existence*

Indeed, open-endedness implies infinity of human existence and their significance. Human, confined by society and history, is limited in many aspects. Thus, shaking off every chain and being free becomes a priority for every individual. Yet, in the author's eyes, men or the firm sea walls, they share the same destiny: disappearance.

However, this is not the ultimate truth of human life. Even if everything is doomed to disappear in the end, it is always a priority for men to explore what it means to be human and their ultimate meaning in their limited lifetime. Just as Sisyphus in Greek mythology pushing the giant rolling stone all the time, human being never ceases to explore the meaning and very purpose of life. What's more, with this perseverance in mind, they are sure to uncover the ultimate truth.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

The study has addressed distinctive angles of viewing *Disappearance* from polyphonic style precisely. While other studies focused on grand context, e.g. cultural hegemony, the present study found that

human value and significance of individuals should be highly emphasized. The reason underlying such a difference may lie in different emphasis of various theories, which offer unique angles of studying phenomena of human society. The study also provided insights into individuality and their inner consciousness. Just as Bakhtin contended in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: a person enters into dialogue as an integral voice. He participates in it not only with his thoughts, but also with his fate and with his entire individuality [7].

To sum up, first, polyphony theory, especially polyphonic style discussed in the paper, has offered readers a fascinating angle of viewing literature work from subjectivity, dialogue, and open-endedness. These features differentiate polyphonic novels from traditional monologic novels in that: in monologic novels, the protagonists are usually closed, and their thoughts and actions were restricted to authors, thus they are not free at all [10]. Yet in polyphonic novels, protagonists are equal to their authors, and their relation is always opened. Therefore, these protagonists are utterly free in their views and deeds.

Second, absent in traditional monologic novels, dialogue in polyphonic novels is deeply rooted in Carnival Spirit. On that day, everyone is at once equal and free from actual hierarchy. Only at this moment, everyone is himself/herself as a true human being and individual, and a brand new equal relation between people could be realized for a while [10].

Finally, open-endedness offers polyphonic novels unique glamor with its provoking power. In *Disappearance*, the author's reflections on human existence and significance are shown throughout the entire novel, this is exactly what Bakhtin always emphasized: individual personality inside every cultural group instead of searching for unanimous agreement [9]. All in all, polyphony theory could be an effective lens for readers to view and comprehend significance of individuals and their value in *Disappearance* and other literary works.

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