Chapter V

A critical and comparative look on the theses of Buber, Bakhtin and Levinas

In our previous chapter we have seen that it is the concrete person who is responsible to stand out in the difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The difference between one’s unlimited responsibility and one’s singularity is effaced by the appearance of the convicted self, i.e. self as responsibility which appears to itself in its person. The ‘other’ convicts the ‘self’ to give an answer for the ‘other’. The difference between one’s unlimited responsibility and one’s singularity is effaced in an appearance to itself. In this way one is called upon to answer for the other to everyone else. A comparative analysis of the approaches of the three thinkers, viz., Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas will give us a more articulated view of the development of phenomenology of dialogue based upon a shift in the intentionality thesis from its traditional perspective in and through Husserlian lineage and legacy to the dialogical perspective. The common theme of these three thinkers is the ultimate dissolution of the primacy of hierarchical cleavage between knower-knowable, subject-object dichotomies in the face of the possibility of a dialogical epistemology based upon a philosophical anthropology that upholds the primacy of relationality in understanding the reality in a holistic sense. In case of Buber the holistic approach is basically towards the other human being and then to the world and God; it consists in invoking the primordial man-world and man-man relationship, its subversion,
and its regaining through an act of distancing the self from the knowable and then entering into the space of relationship between *I-Thou* in a conscious manner.

This viewpoint is expected to integrate different phases of dialogicality viz. *dialogue preceding language/speech, dialogue in language, and dialogue beyond language*. These different phases speak of a fundamental relation between being and language/speech. This is quite in consonance with what Buber says about the regaining of meaning: “Only I-thou gives meaning to the world of it, for I-thou is an end which is not reached in time but is there from the start, originating and carrying – through.”¹ In *the hermeneutical* philosophy of Gadamer, we find that linguistic mediation is an essential feature of dialogue, i.e. dialogue is possible only in and through language.² But to limit dialogue to language is to defy its being and subvert the possibility of language communication and speech as an event. Secondly, in that case, philosophical anthropology, which is a primary concern of all these three thinkers, becomes extremely derivative in its nature with reference to institutions determining its scope because language is an institution. Thirdly though the nature of dialogue is explicated through language for discursive purpose, it is also indicative of infinite potentiality of language beyond its institutional limitations as it sets language in relation to the existential being of speakers.

This relationship between *I* and *Thou* or the other becomes basically non-propositional. Such a relationship consists in self-disclosure and here there is no question of interiority of the self. In a dialogical context, meaning is always meaning in and through meeting with the reality. The being of man
that relates itself to an artistic or aesthetic creation is no other than a symbiosis of this being with relation's own being.

This being of relation is relation's-own being and thereby it is another mode of the being of man. The central operative notion of Martin Buber i.e. “dialogue" is manifest in the relationships between man and man, man and nature (in its non-utilitarian dimension), man and God as Eternal Thou and aesthetic object and man as its beholder and creator. Its manifestation in the realm of art is undeniable and experienced directly, if someone is skeptic about such relationship with regard to nature and also God. The epistemological and ontological methods, which rely heavily on the bifurcation of the subject and the object fails to reveal the true nature of the experiential whole that forms the real core of aesthetic experience. Buber's I-thou relationship integrates the two into one experiential whole. Dialogue brings man close to art. His subjectivity in this respect or his subjective feeling or understanding about art is not possible unless there is a pre-existing relation between man and art, which is based upon an extension of man's primordial dialogical relation with the world into a particular relation of man with a particular transfiguration of the world in an art object. Nevertheless, this particular relationship falls within man's integral relation with the world. But a space is created as a gap between man and world. When man transfigures the world into an aesthetic object, it results in this 'gap' of a 'dialogue', because the very act of transfiguration is a particular way of creating the world, and its appreciation is a mode of re-entering into a relationship with the world. Transfiguration brings out an expression of man's being in his subjectivity while setting it in another mode of relationship with the world. This entire phenomenon exhibits a two-fold relationship with one experiential whole and reveals itself accordingly. It
consists in an act of creation that is subjective as the first fold, while its appreciation, interpretation and understanding is nothing but a 'dialogue', which is its second-fold. The two get merged together and emerge as a new relationship, - the *I-thou* relationship.

Listening to a piece of music, reading a poem, etc. are man's acts to get at the 'in-itself' of an aesthetic object, but man gets at it by experiencing it in its own mode of existence, which is a "for-itself". It is self-illuminating and therefore, it is no longer an *It*, but something more than *It*, a quasi-consciousness. Man's experience of this state comes through his intimate nearness to it, man goes near to it through 'dialogue'. Finally when he gets it in his subjectivity, man's ego is not getting it, but is getting transformed into the subject of the "in-itself" of the aesthetic object in question.

This transformation of man's ego into the subject of what art-object contains is its becoming 'Thou'. Here the subject is a communicative subject in the sense of its being dialogic. But we should bear in mind that being dialogic is more than being communicative. Dialogue is both attitudinal and action-oriented. As we discussed above dialogue is pre-linguistic, linguistic and also trans-linguistic. Communication is primarily action-oriented. When we speak of value-perspective of any communicative situation or communication as such, we borrow such perspective from the philosophical and axiological nuances of the concept of dialogue. When we talk of communication in the context of phenomenology of dialogue communication is more in consonance with such perspective.

This becoming of self is possible due to the nature of man's dialogic communication with the art-object. It is a transformation of not only the *I-It*
into *I-Thou*, but a mutual affection of both *I* and *Thou*. The becoming of an art-object as 'Thou' is the final act of becoming the *whole* in experience. In this process of becoming man's consciousness of the art-object is transformed into that consciousness of the art object, which is *realm of the between*, which is a *no-thing*; I, -- the space of 'dialogue'. Object are subject here together form the "realm of the between" as the meeting of the two subjects. Hence, it is a dialogue.

The whole being of man includes both these dimensions of consciousness and man's consciousness is only aware of these two dimensions. In *I-thou* relationship, the world is renewed as a *Thou* by the human being in his special act of creation. In normal day-to-day communicative actions this *Thou* is often lost because in such activities *Thou* often becomes an object among objects and the relation gets permeated with a means. Moreover, in these cases, language as an institution controls and interferes with speech and communicative actions. Thus the concept of dialogue gathers two senses. In one case, language as an institution dominates and the relation tends to get lost in *I-It*. Where the attitudinal and ontological aspects of dialogue prevail, dialogue remains in its true spirit. In the second case dialogue re-creates the world. For example in aesthetic communication the meaning of the art object and the world as a whole is renewed beyond their fact-ridden senses. “The distinction between the two senses of the notion of dialogue correspondence to the distinction between Gadamer’s concept of dialogue as a fusion of two horizons through the mediation of language, and the concept of dialogue as explicated by Martin Buber and Maurice Friedman. For Buber and Friedman
meaning of linguistic expressions is originally parasitic upon our meeting the reality.”

Buber's influence has been acknowledged within various academic disciplines. Also the impact of his thought has received cross-disciplinary dimensions. But primary target of Buber was to develop a philosophical anthropology in terms of his philosophy of dialogue. In this dissertation we have tried to work out the specific phenomenological connotation of what he called 'dialogue' and the particular mode of intentionality of consciousness in acts of dialogue without which understanding of his philosophical anthropology would be impossible. This idea of dialogue with its phenomenological implications has percolated in different sectors of human thought and covered a wide range of human concerns. This concept of dialogue has now been the foundation of and a major integrating factor in the human sciences. Mutuality, presence, and openness in meeting the other in his or her uniqueness and not just as a content for one's own thought and knowing constitute the structure of intentionality here; its relevance to and methodological significance for human sciences is unquestionable. Against this backdrop the concept has gathered further nuances and its applications by different thinkers have opened newer dimensions of it. Sometimes it has been so due to particular emphasis on some particular aspect of it.

Bakhtin placed emphasis on otherness in the dialogical sphere, and defined it as a value. Also he developed ‘dialogism’ as a special methodology for human sciences and as a tool of literary thought. This dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two. It is the relation that is most important phenomenon, for without it the meaning of any utterance cannot be deciphered. For Bakhtin, nothing is in itself and self-understanding
or ‘I’ is dialogic. At the heart of any dialogue is the conviction that what is exchanged has meaning. At any moment of dialogue, there is a great mass of meaning. Now, we cannot think of any dialogue without languages. Unlike Buber and like some hermeneuticians like Gadamer linguisticality in dialogue or dialogue as a speech-event has been emphasized in Bakhtin’s philosophy. To Bakhtin also, any word can have special significance in thought for its dialogical nature. Language without the component of dialogicality is without any sense. So far as the epistemological and ontological commitment of Bakhtin is concerned, it stands between ‘abstract objectivism’ and ‘individualistic subjectivism’. It somehow corresponds to Buber’s rejection of the binarism between individualistic anthropology and collectivistic anthropology for reaching dialogical anthropology. Bakhtin’s position has further ramifications in the domains of ethics, aesthetics and literary thought: “In order to specify what “language” means in dialogism, it will be useful to remember the history of its appropriation in Bakhtin’s own development. Bakhtin formulated the antinomy between “abstract objectivism” and “individualistic subjectivism”...at a time when he was rearticulating the self and the other modality that runs throughout his thought. He had originally treated the self and the other relations as a contribution to such classical philosophical subjects as aesthetic, ethics and epistemology.”

Bakhtin’s phenomenology of self and the other became increasingly linguistic. But Bakhtin says that the words should be used from the point of view of those who actually use language. Bakhtin always uses dialogism as a relative term explicable in contrast with what is monologic: “As Bakhtin makes very clear in the notebook … the difference between “character” and “person” is a specification of the even more fundamental distinction between “I” and
“another”. Character is a monologic, finished-off, generalized category that is given and determined – all aspects of “anotherness”. Person on the other hand is dialogic, still unfolding, unique event that has the “madness” and unpredictability rooted in conditions relating to “self”. Thus the viewpoint of a literary protagonist treated as a person would seem to fall outside the limits of what is usually considered literary analysis, even before the question of representing such a viewpoint in language is raised.” It clearly echoes Buber’s concept of *betweenness* as an essential feature of the dialogical. In spite of Buber’s emphasis upon dialogue as more than mere conversation, the idea of dialogue as speech event is latent in Buber’s description of *I-Thou* as *primary word*. But in Buber’s case, one may interpret it as consequent upon the dialogical.

Of course, Bakhtin is not alone in proving a subject *produced* by language. But it was Bakhtin who paid attention to question of relation between one and the other. He conceived an utterance as an act of authorship. In our context we can conceive it as an intentional act that begins from the relational consciousness i.e. the consciousness that is dialogical. Emergence of dialogism as a theory for explaining any text can be understood from this clue. While searching for the answer to question as regards how he could know himself and how he could know if it was he or another who was talking Bakhtin realized that in both the cases utterance is to be understood as an act of authorship. Utterance activates apparently simple address in everyday speech and animates complex works of art. Dialogism assumes that there is no figure without a ground. Our mind is so structured that the world is always perceived by some contrast. By contrast, the time in which we perceive others
is closed and finished and the space in which we perceive others is a neutral environment. Dialogism is a name for multiplicity in human perception. It manifests itself as a series of distinctions between perceiver and perceived.

Mikhail Bakhtin is influenced by Martin Buber and envisages a dialogical epistemology, which we have seen in our third chapter. Bakhtin’s philosophy tries to understand human behaviour through the use human make of language. Buber and Bakhtin both analyzed the agent or participant-oriented view of dialogue and dialogue-oriented view of constructed selves. Bakhtin proposes the dialogic concept of language as fundamental. His philosophy is a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge. Relations between inner and outer speech dramatize the interconnectedness of dialogism’s various concerns, for though rooted in language, they cannot be examined without reference to psychology and social theory. To pursue this set of inter-related questions we have clarified the way relations between inner and outer speech bear on relations between individual and society.

To mitigate the tension between agent or participant-oriented view of dialogue and the dialogue-oriented view of constructed selves, we have gone though existential phenomenology of ethics of Levinas in our fourth chapter. In the phenomenological transcendental notion of ‘I’, self-consciousness confirms itself as an ‘I’. Levinas’ notion of ‘I’ differs from this. In itself Levinas’ ‘I’ is empty. It is just the signified mark of something that responds to the infinite. It recognizes that just beside the ‘other’ there is ‘I’. According to Levinas, the ‘I’ marks the movement of experience within live human consciousness.
According to Levinas, on the intentional side of consciousness, the ‘self’ finds itself as the ‘other’. The ‘self’ here sees itself as the ‘other’. The identifying of the ‘self’ is called the double intentionality. Recognizing itself as an intentional ‘other’, the ‘self’ is bound with a responsibility before his freedom. But identifying the ‘self’ with the ‘other’ involves a sense of being persecuted and accused as the ‘other’ by the ‘self’. But this is secondary in Levinas’s thought. What is important is the transformation of self as pure responsibility. Levinas argues that the sense of responsibility is prior to being. The self becomes other with an admittance of its own finitude and limitation of freedom. Before the identification of the self with the other, the other remains non-intentional, because at that moment, the other is a known object to the self. It is the subject of consciousness of the self, which experiences the other. When the self faces the other, the commitment is normally conceived as positive. But Levinas sometimes describes this as negative. He says that in the commitment the I universalizes as itself, as something substantive and above the other. But the mode of assumption of selfhood is ‘forced to dispossess itself to the point of loosing itself.’ He says, “Self assumes this responsibility without fail because without this sense of being the prosecutor, self is not situated in occupying someone else’s place. The answer of the ‘self’ to the prosecuted would be to posit itself as ‘persecuted’. This movement from the position of the ‘persecutor’ to the ‘persecuted’ happens in a strange sense of responsibility.”

Now, even if the ‘self’ responds to the ‘other’, Levinas says that the ‘other’ remains the ‘other’. In the discourse of responsibility, the ‘other’ is to be recognized first. But the recognition of the ‘other’ should not remain one-sided; it should be a recognition of both the ‘I’ and the ‘other’. A distance still
remains there between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’. But the process of this recognition shapes the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’. In some course, the ‘self’ fears of being alienated from the ‘other’. It sometimes sees itself as the ‘other’ of itself in its self-enclosed intentionality because the non-intentional consciousness of ‘other’ is already subjected to ‘otherness’. In a simpler version, with the transformation of self as pure responsibility, or rather, the equation of self with responsibility leads to dissolution of the earlier being of self as a possessor; here self becomes an other in the face of the infinitude of the other. Unlike Buber’s other, Levinas’s other is marked with non-presence because presence sometimes points to specifications and limitations. Infinitude of the dialogical space is conceived more with a reference to the other becoming an absence, which is not mere overt absence. Like non-presence, it is non-absence. Impossibility to characterize the other in any term signifies the infinity of the other and the dialogical reality.

With this notion of dialogue, epistemology in knowing the other human person becomes novel. Levinas says that consciousness should not be understood primarily as that which seeks to represent the object adequately. Actually the consciousness in its transformed being cannot be expressed fully: “Intentionality, where thought remains in adequation with the object, does not define consciousness as its most fundamental level”.

With this background of the equation of self with responsibility Levinas holds that Husserl’s emphasis on intentionality is a distortion of human experience. Levinas argues for phenomenology to be beyond intentionality in its Husserlian sense. The world of transcendent things depends on consciousness. Conscious life is a life in the presence of transcendent things. Husserl’s theory of intentionality is understood as an ontological account by Levinas, -
ontological in a fundamental sense that is always questionable. The notion of subjec-
tivity in Levinas is very much a religiously inspired vision of the subject, a subject who is borne out of its relations to the other, a subject whose nature is connected with the notion of infinity. Furthermore, subjectivity, for Levinas, is not hostility to the other, but rather is welcoming the other. The challenge to totality comes in the experience of the other: “Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without philosophically “demonstrating” eschatological “truths”. We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other.”

Levinas characterized Husserl as the philosopher of ‘representation’ and ‘intentionality’. Besides this natural sphere of living and enjoyment, there is also the domain of objectifying intentionality, which seeks to represent everything. Here the assumption is that knowledge is power. Intentionality understood as representation is the beginning of a separation from which human existence never recovers. In intentionality, there is of course recognition of transcendence, but this relation to the transcendence is usually distorted. Levinas understands ‘representation’ in the context of Husserl’s philosophy of constitution where representation always involves a “transcendental constitution” and representation always means bringing the other under the power of the same. Representation, for Levinas, belongs to the sphere of the same.

Levinas contrasts the experience of the ‘face’ with the way in which humans relate to things in the world, the manner in which objects are ‘represented’ in our intentional acts. Levinas claims that the self-other relation is not
reciprocal, but rather there is a priority of the other over the self. The relation between the transcendence lead to the other, whose the idea of Infinity has enabled us to specify. The relationship with the other, or the idea of Infinity, accomplishes the desire, which is beyond satisfaction and non-satisfaction. The man of enjoyment who remains cautious, who ensures his separation, can be unaware of his phenomenality. If separation is to be described in terms of enjoyment and economy, Levinas says that this is because of the sovereignty of man that is a simple reverse of the relation with the other. The relationship of the ‘I’ with the ‘other’ is not the same as the relation of the objectifying thought. Here, the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ does not have the formal logic which is found in all the relations.

The relationship of ‘I’ with the ‘other’ is the only relationship where the both of them find themselves in each other. Now, the relation exactly corresponds to the meaning of phenomenon. The phenomenon is the being that appears but remains absent. It is the reality that lacks reality. As Levinas says, “Being, the thing in itself, is not, with respect to the phenomenon, the hidden. Its presence presents itself in its word. To posit the thing in itself as hidden would be to suppose that it is with respect to the phenomenon what the phenomenon is to the appearance. The truth of disclosure is at most the truth of the phenomenon hidden under the appearances; the truth of the thing in itself is not disclosed. The thing in itself expresses itself. Expression manifests the presence of being, but not by simply drawing aside the drawing of the phenomenon. It is of itself presence of a face, and hence appealing and teaching, entry into relation with me – the ethical relation.” (Hand Sean(ed), The Levinas Reader)

What follows is that with self-responsibility equation, the entry to the dialogical sphere becomes essentially an ethical entry and the intentionality of
consciousness goes absolutely contrary to that of Husserl’s pure phenomenology. Levinas’s position thus becomes even more radical than that of Buber, though it begins with an acknowledgement of Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue. Unlike Bakhtin there is again an emphasis upon the trans-linguistic dimension of dialogue in the philosophy of Levinas. So far as the true spirit of Levinas’s existential phenomenology is concerned, language must follow this new intentional structure of consciousness; it must be conceived as essentially dialogic.

After the long discussion of the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ or in the words of Buber ‘I-Thou’, and throwing a comparative look on the three writers, we have so far understood that the relation between ‘I’ and the ‘other’ is based on some invisible but realizable fact, which is more than fact due to a reversal of elf-other relationship. With this changed perception of human reality the intentional structure of knowledge of this reality is also to be conceived differently. We can describe it as ‘dialogical intentionality’ and the phenomenology that emerges from it can be described as ‘phenomenology of dialogue’. It concerns with the fact whether it is possible to conceive of intentional acts as originating from a dialogical space, which prioritizes neither ‘I’ as knower nor the ‘other’ as the known. It is this intentionality thesis, which is potential to conclude the tension between an agent-oriented and the other-oriented reflections upon intentional acts.

The intentionality thesis that we have tried to construct with reference to these three thinkers has definitely immense potentiality to serve as a major methodological tool in human and cultural sciences. Our goal is to highlight that primarily. It is understandable that there is likely to be argumentative inadequacies in the articulation of this new trend of philosophy and
phenomenology. The debate whether it is the emphasis upon the presence or non-presence or absence or non-absence that should be accepted as the key-term for understanding this type of intentionality will perhaps continue. In this debate we shall perhaps gain more. What is basic in this phenomenology is the death of self as subject of other and the world, and this death must be regarded as a value.
Notes and References:


5. Ibid, p-162


