Chapter-III

NOVEL AND SOCIETY: HETEROGLOSSIA, POLYPHONY AND DIALOGIC IMAGINATION IN THE NOVELS OF R.K. NARAYAN

I

The striking feature of Bakhtin’s theories is an elasticity that is extendable to non-literary categories as well. As a humanist, Bakhtin’s philosophy is primarily informed by a Christian theology that underpins the ‘present’, the ‘human’, the rich and complex manifestation of everyday life. Clark and Holquist observe: “Christ is important for revealing for the first time the basis of all human consciousness and thus for supplying the key to understanding all things human.” (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 86) For Bakhtin and the Russians as well, Christ is the word enfleshed, a human being who cleansed the ‘self’ from cool solipsism and inculcated a feeling of communality in devoting the self to the other. “Christ gave up the privileges of divinity, his uniqueness, to share the general condition of humanity, a model establishing the priority of shared as opposed to individual values. In Bakhtin’s thought this concept is translated out of the discourse of theology into the more
widely appropriable discourses of linguistics and social theory.” (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 85) Christ is an event in the development of human consciousness which is a consciousness of the self’s relation to the other. Bakhtin uses these theological ideas to refresh areas other than theology like language, society and the nature of the ‘self’. Bakhtin related the traditional concern of the ‘Logos’ or the ‘Word of God’ or God’s authorship of the world to the understanding of the nature of language. The inescapable dualities of spirit and matter in theology are imbued in the sign – the signifier/signified duality in language. The word as a sign is a material thing, a physical production of the speech organs or the pen on paper. But the word transcends itself in meaning. The problem of duality lies in the fact that the sign is never what it signifies: “I am never any of the signs that name me.” The relationship of the self with the world – a problem proposed by Kant and made much of by the neo-Kantians like Cohen in Bakhtin’s time is the dyad around which Bakhtin’s literary and extra literary theories are organized. But, as Clark and Holquist have claimed: “Although the self/other distinction is a recurring preoccupation of many other post-Romantic systems of thought, Bakhtin is the only major figure to frame
the problem in terms of authorship. He is distinguished not by his emphasis on the self/other dichotomy as such but rather by his emphasis on the essentially authorial techniques of dialogue and character formation which permits the poles of consciousness to interact while maintaining their fundamental difference from each other. Ultimately, Bakhtin’s thought is a philosophy of creation, a meditation on the mysteries inherent in God’s making people and people’s making selves, with the activity of people creating other people in literary authorship as a paradigm for thinking at all levels of creating.” (1984: 80) For Bakhtin, authorship means the archetectonics of consciousness.

In chalking out the archetectonics, Bakhtin finds examples in the natural world. If a form has the capacity to react to a stimulus and is able to answer it, it is alive. Bakhtin believed in human agency and for him living, even in its meanest form is a constant reaction and answering to the environment. He found that the human body is the most complex form of existence. “The human body is a social organization of teeming histological communities, each of which is in turn composed of individual cells, all interacting with each other in a constantly inter-relating community of ‘languages’, a heteroglossia of
electrochemical impulses and hormonal “dialects” and emotive “patois”. In the same way that all these sub-systems interact with each other, the integrate system they all constitute in their entirety socially interacts with other persons. Not only are situations in the human social environment more varied than those encountered by protozoa, but even when a situation repeats itself among humans, we cannot know absolutely how each of us will respond. Each of us has a capacity to be unique, which makes all human beings, as a species, unique.” (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 67) The distinctiveness of each response is the specific form of that person’s answerability. However, Bakhtin’s concept of authorship is greatly indebted to the concept of simultaneity in science too. Because of the assumed split between mind and world, a major problem of the mind is how to see the world and translate it. Duality may be perceived in biology too which proves the duality of bifocal vision and also the working of the bicameral brain. The result is a conception of the world created by the simultaneous working of two different spheres of the brain. Thus reality is always mediated. “Bakhtin, who was influenced by that great physiologist of the brain A.A. Ukhtomsky, suggests that constant mediation between the role of
self and that of other is the mechanism by which we conceptualize and, to a degree, control at the level of mind dualities which are present in biology at the level of mere brain.” (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 73) Nothing is complete in this world and the self’s ability of perception is partial and requires the uniqueness in the placement of the other to bridge this gap. Thus reality or authorship is a simultaneous effort of the self and the other. Non-coincidence between self and other is a constitutive feature of human perception. It is an optimistic theory, for instead of lamenting alienation it rejoices in ‘alterity’. Since the place each one of us occupies is unique, things that evade my vision and those which occupy it distinctively help in the constitution of myself. “Self creates itself in crafting an architectonic relation between the unique locus of life activity which the individual human organism constitutes and the constantly changing natural and cultural environment which surrounds it. This is the meaning of Bakhtin’s dictum that the self is an act of grace, a gift of the other.” (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 68)

At the core of this non-coincidence of existence and simultaneity of activity lies the concept of heteroglossia, that like many other theories of Bakhtin may be extended to all spheres of human
knowledge. For Bakhtin, being is the result of the struggle between two non-coinciding forces. Thus the self, which is expressed by the pronoun ‘I’ constitutes itself from the markers provided by others. It is conceptually seeing the self by refracting the world through values of the other. But the self and the other are characterized by a different space and different time. The self’s time is open or ‘unfinished’. Achieving the self is always incomplete – it remains as a project of becoming in the future. But the other is architectonically completed by me and is a unified whole. Thus there is bound to be an ambiguity of values. It is an example of the constant struggle between the centripetal and the centrifugal forces. The ‘I’ is the ground for openness while the other is a ground that ensures the possibility of completing. The peculiar mode of the first person pronoun is a constant struggle between the subjective experience which is centrifugal or chaotic and open, and the centripetal force that tries to define and close me with abstract systems. Bakhtin perceives this struggle in Dostoevsky’s underground man who insists to negate all definitions with which society might label him.

If ‘I’ is the infinite self the other is finite in the self’s conception, then the other is also a self and thus the process is reciprocative. It is the
infinite, yet to be and chaotic consciousness of the selves in the world that may be called centrifugal force that struggles against the constant centralization of the centripetal force that works in all levels of human existence. Starting from the human consciousness and language to the more concrete levels of state and politics, Bakhtin perceived a constant struggle of the heteroglossia to polemicize meaning, to question and to continue the dialogue of existence. Bakhtin insists on language as being the heart of any culture and conceives utterances as the place where the struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces is fought out in miniature. An utterance takes shape in an environment of dialogized heteroglossia. This understanding leads Bakhtin in categorizing authors, schools, genres according to their preference for any of the two forces that constitute the struggle in language. The existence of the centrifugal forces or heteroglossia has always been accepted, but there has always been a conscious effort to order the flux by using a unitary language in a work. Such works are monoglots and have existed from the beginning of the history of literature. In comparison, the heteroglot writing is more young. The heteroglot writing, instead of concealing the centrifugal forces in an apparently monoglot style, celebrates the diversity and
conflict. It constitutes itself out of the very stratification of discourse. Although skeptical of all languages it assumes the voice of truth.

Bakhtin found the novel to be the most effective instrument of exploiting and strengthening heteroglossia. The heteroglot novel is more efficient in bridging the gap between the self-other dichotomy. "Because the heteroglot novel is more open to difference it could more easily absorb the increasing tide of self-consciousness. In other words, the heteroglot novel was able to accommodate more of the self because it is more sensitive to otherness." (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 291)

In extending the concept of Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia' to the fictional architectonic of Narayan, we hypothesize that Narayan's works centralize a heteroglot vision. However, instead of discussion of all his works, the analysis is focused on selective works that are considered to be key texts in the development of Narayan as a novelist. The qualifying aspects of the key texts hinge upon the fact that they have become the beginning and extension of particular themes within the broader framework of the author's vision that seeks to look at the world from a location that is Malgudi. This method is also followed in exploring
concepts such as polyphony and dialogism of Bakhtin in examining Narayan’s fictional works in different sections of the chapter.

A world-view shared by both Bakhtin and Dostoevsky may be used as a rationale behind the architectonics that constitutes Narayan’s novels, which, behind a deceptive simplicity of unadorned rendering, exhibit varieties of discourse and techniques of narration. While *The English Teacher* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* have first-person narration, for *Swami, The Bachelor of Arts, Mr. Sampath, The Financial Expert* and *The Sweet Vendor*, Narayan employs the third person narration. In *The Guide*, Narayan uses a mixed mode – the interposition of the first person narrative and the omniscient third person narrative. While in *The English Teacher* the ‘I’ is autobiographical, the ‘I’ of *Man Eater* is only the witness to the activities of Vasu and the reactions to his activities. Again the third-person omniscience is also variegated. In *The Darkroom* it is neutral, while in *Swami, The Bachelor* and in *Waiting* it is limited omniscience with casual shifts in focus. The authorial position in Narayan’s narrative keeps on shifting, mediating among many other subjectivities while creating a polyphonic environment. The discourses in his novels embed double-voiced
discourse like parody or a healthy and unpinching satire, inner dialogues, and a deliberately brazen, no-nonsense, unsentimental rendering of the documentary discourse which turns the more intimate and colourful reflections ambiguous and polemic. There are often sharp and unexpected turns from parody to a deeper irony, from the very material concern to the poetic or even metaphysical.

A very interesting example of the heteroglot novel that revels in the polemic of truth may be cited in Narayan's *The English Teacher*. This piece is specially selected because as in an autobiographical writing, the author is here closest to the hero. This is a form in which one sees and gives utterance to one’s own life. In such a writing the same person is divided between the self and the other – the self who has experienced life and the other who authors that experience. The axiological force of the other determines the self and renders a valuational history. Without the help of the other, the self remains fragmented, divested of value. The self who is the hero, is the bearer of the lived life, while the other, who is the narrator, is the bearer of the unity of form. The hero is the narrator as he coincides with the other in himself who aestheticizes him. Being the two sides of the same person,
the hero and the author in such a writing belong to the same axiological world. So there is always the possibility that the fundamental and essential character of the hero’s otherness is not properly expressed and the writing may become naïve and one-sided. But the interesting point about Narayan is that in his auto-biographical writing the author is skeptical towards the hero’s life. He seeks to consummate the hero’s life from a point of view which is in principle different from the way that life was lived. He does this by the use of parody, oxymoron, irony in general, while situating the hero in the world of others. The hero is created in this struggling world of transgressant values of consummation that constantly oppose the hero’s own values of a lived life. Thus the hero is constantly being created on the boundaries of this narrative struggle.

_The English Teacher_ follows a first person narrative mode where the inner dialogue of Krishna goes back and forth in a dialectical bend in order to concretize the self. It is the unfinished sense of the self in Krishna that cannot accept the finite and well-defined garb of the English teacher. The novel starts with the note:
The urge had been upon me for some days past to take myself in hand. What was wrong with me? I couldn’t say, some sort of vague disaffection, a self-rebellion I might call it. The feeling again and again came upon me that as I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow (perhaps, a cow, with justice, might feel hurt at the comparison), eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking, etc. – all done to perfection, I was sure, but always leaving behind a sense of something missing. (Narayan, 1955:5)

It is his revolt against the centripetal force that works in terms of systems and formulas. For him, the people around him like Gajapathy, Mr. Brown or Rangappa and the larger society itself constitute this force. In their eyes Krishna is the ‘other’ who may be completed and defined. Thus, according to Brown, it is the English teacher’s duty to save the students from committing such unpardonable blunders like dropping the ‘u’ from ‘honours’. Mr. Brown’s sentiments emerge from the British ego that was struggling to maintain the purity of its language in the face of the growing distortion in its colonies as well as in America. But for Krishna, a non-English person, this makes no difference. Gajapathy in his role of the Assistant Professor finds the lapse of his department disgraceful and scowls at his juniors furiously. Krishna argues – “Mr. Gajapathy, there are blacker sins in this world than a dropped vowel.” (Narayan, 1955:6) During the after-dinner chat,
Rangappa agrees with the English teacher: “I said the English department existed solely for dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s.” (Narayan, 1955: 7) But Krishna could not agree and the novel continues to employ a double-voiced dialogue on his role, until Krishna decides to quit for a different role. But will a shift from teaching in a college to the role of a teacher in a nursery school resolve his debate? In fact, in the novel Krishna plays several roles but there is a constant slipping away or shifting of roles and the conscious ‘self’ of Krishna continues to remain as uncertain as ever. For example, at the very beginning he defines himself as a poet and thus tries to justify his dissatisfaction: “But such repose was not in my nature, perhaps because I was a poet, and I was constantly nagged by the feeling that I was doing the wrong work.” (Narayan, 1955: 5) Yet throughout the novel there is no evidence of a serious endeavour on his part to write poetry. The few spasmodic attempts are almost parodic, conveyed to us by Krishna himself with a tongue-in-cheek humour and thus he negates his own definition of himself: “I made a space on the table by pushing aside all the books; took out a sheet of paper and wrote a poem entitled “Nature”, about fifty lines a verse. I read and re-read it, and found it very
satisfying. I felt I had discharged a duty assigned to me in some eternal scheme.” (Narayan, 1955: 11) But like the evidences of “half a dozen similar resolves in the past and the lapses” (Narayan, 1955: 10) – this too proves shortlived, and he gets absorbed in the role of playing husband to Susila. He is visited by the Muse several months later: “My conscience had a habit of asserting itself once in six months and reminding me that I ought to write poetry.” (Narayan, 1955: 45) He brings out his carefully bound copybook that has thousand pages, each page eager to receive the ink of a future poet, but only ten pages are fortunate. Krishna fills the eleventh page with a poem on Susila that sounds like Wordsworth in a new garb. Krishna’s resolve is undoubtedly double-voiced: “I always fancied that I was born for a poetic career and some day I hoped to take the world by storm with the publication.” (Narayan, 1955: 45) The objective and critical tone of these lines is set against the protagonist’s anticipated image of himself which is tinged with the colour of secret longing.

As a teacher too, Krishna is a déclassé personality, with his tendency of constant self-criticism and his habit of looking at himself from the perspective of his students: “These poor boys are now all
attention, cowed by your superior force. They are ready to listen to you and write down whatever you may say. What have you to give them in return? (Narayan, 1955: 13) This interior monologue shows how Krishna strives to anticipate possible definitions and assessments of him by his students. It is also confessional and self-critical. It reminds us of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who ruthlessly dissects himself from the perspectives of his mother and sister when they compromise their honour to pay the university fees for the scholarly son:

And she actually writes to me: ‘Love Dunia, Rodia, for she loves you more than herself’: isn’t that the pangs of secret remorse for agreeing to sacrifice her daughter to her son? ‘You are our hope, all we have!’ O mamma! ...” (Dostoevsky, 1985: 57)

When Susila and the baby appear in the scene, Krishna is really uncertain about his role. He is terrified by the prospect of acting father to a seven-month baby: “But I didn’t bargain to accept her guardianship so suddenly.” (Narayan, 1955: 20) Susila’s complete dependence on him disturbs him and his inflated self esteem sounds a bit hollow: “I felt I was someone whose plans and determinations were of the utmost importance to others ...” (Narayan, 1955: 20)
Krishna’s depiction of his wife, In spite of his passion and love for her, is cold and documentary in style, and there is no attempt on his part describe or define her. As a result, every movement and utterance of Susila, when conveyed, brings out unprecedented surprises revealing her personality. If at one moment she is loving and kind, the next moment, in a different situation she exposes unexpected pettiness; if one morning she inspirs her husband to write poetry, that very afternoon she sells his clock without any desire to appease or understand his sentiments; if one day she is a doting mother, and a lynx-eyed and tight-fisted home-maker, the next day she melts down into the shy and innocent beloved. Thus, Susila too is a character that remains unfinalizable.

Susila’s sudden typhoid and death at the middle of the novel matches with the episodic nature of Narayan’s novels where the characters are thrown from one situation to another in a no-nonsense unsentimental deliberation. Yet the integral irony of the work joins the episodes with a centralizing pull and the flux of life is realized. When Susila dies her life, her every step in her marriage and her casual conversations with her husband suddenly change their dimensions. In
the face of death every confident utterance of life seems ironical. Thus
her craving for a house with decorative bathroom tiles fitted in the
living room gets connected with her horrible experience in the filthy
bathroom and the consequent typhoid and death. This episode acquires a
new dimension as the apparently chaotic episodes get connected in
irony. When in her deathbed she is totally isolated from her daughter,
her husband’s casual advice to his wife to leave her child alone and not
fuss too much suddenly, overgrows and overwhelms in meaning, when
Susila actually dies: “She (the child) must learn to exist by herself …”
(Narayan, 1955: 53)

True to the carnivalesque demand of the matter over mind, the
daily life leaves little space for Krishna to brood on the aftermath of his
wife’s death. He has to readjust himself into the twin role of both father
and mother and his views are adjusted accordingly. Shifting his roles
and decentering his self-definitions, Krishna thus becomes part of the
chaotic flux of life. After cremating his wife, the shock and pain
benumbs him, and for that intense moment he feels: “For me the
greatest reality is this and nothing else … Nothing else will worry or
interest me in life hereafter.” (Narayan, 1955: 96) In a monologic
writing this may well have been the end. But in a heteroglot novel, the plurality of consciousness, even in a single character is brought out. It shows how utterances can never be taken as final. The remaining five more chapters of the volume after Susila’s death neutralizes Krishna’s nihilism. The very next line reveals Krishna’s intense longing for and dependence on his daughter as a last resort to life. So he takes hold of the last straw of life – Leela. The girl is spick and span and fresh, proving the fact that her father is blissfully engaged: “It kept me very much alive to play both father and mother to her at the same time.” (Narayan, 1955: 97) His acceptance of the situation is a unique mixture of self-pity and bravado almost Senecan: ‘God has given me some novel situations in life. I shall live it out alone, face the problems alone, never drag in another to do the job for me ...’ I found a peculiar satisfaction in making this resolve.” (Narayan, 1955: 97) Krishna’s self-effacing resolve to cloister himself away from all the sympathies and condolences of society is heroic, yet this heroism, at the very next moment is shattered by the practical-talk of the village woman, for whom Krishna’s resolve holds no meaning: “A man must marry within fifteen days of losing his wife. Otherwise he will be ruined. I was the
fourth wife to my husband and he always married within three weeks. All the fourteen children are happy. What is wrong?” (Narayan, 1955: 99) In a novel where heteroglossia rules the roost, it is difficult to remain on the pedestal of heroism, and Narayan’s novels teem with such plurality of consciousnesses. In the bus stand where Krishna had come with his daughter to bid his mother farewell, we hear different voices crisscrossing each other. The mother’s sighs for her son’s misfortune are encountered by the stubborn resolve of her son to remain single forever, the child’s innocent questions are counterpoised by the worldly wise village woman’s practical-talk and all these are set against the din caused by a passenger haggling with the bus conductor for a concession of four annas. The whole scenario of unbridled chaos nullifies any conscious monoglotic tendency to centralize the situation into a sentimental scene.

Heteroglossia is the recognition of the ‘I’ in every personality and also taking into account the different and unique spheres in which the ‘I’s are placed, and the unaccountable and unique reaction of these personalities to the phenomena of life. Even placed under the same
sphere of time, place and situations, these different ‘I’s will produce variegated behaviours. Narayan’s novels thrive on such situations.

The unsentimental rendering of sickness and death in *The English Teacher* is caused by such heteroglossia. Sentiment is ideally connected with sympathy, i.e., the harmony of human reactions towards a certain crisis. In our mind, which is always eager to seek order in chaos, the very idea of sickness or death always gets connected with a general sympathy, and we blindly nurture this illusion. But when people are considered as different ‘selves’, a certain contradiction in reaction may be observed.

Susila’s sickbed brings out such variegated reaction from those who surround her. Susila’s sickness turns her into an alien in the eyes of her little daughter who is facing her mother’s sickness for the first time in her life. Krishna, on his part, retains an illusory cheerfulness, as he is still unable to apprehend the grim and dark realism of disease. He neglects to call a doctor for quite a few days. But when her sickness is confirmed, he plays his role with an illusory self-satisfaction: “There was a morbid pleasure in this thoroughness ... . We were setting the stage for a royal illness from which she was going to emerge fresher,
Krishna’s love for his wife blinds him to the fact of the slow wasting away of Susila’s mortal body. So he is still able to write light verse on the battle between the iceberg and the stubborn fever:

And here it is a great battleground,
The great fight goes on
On either side of this red bag.
But so far it is not the fever which cools,
But ice that melts. (Narayan, 1955: 86)

The maturity of Susila’s parents brings more subdued and less dramatic reactions: “Susila’s parents suffered quietly. There was a deep attachment between them and their daughter.” (Narayan, 1955: 82) Yet in spite of the united sharing of a grim knowledge about disaster, their reactions are different. The father, being more rational, follows the dictates of the doctor with accuracy. “He sat up with his daughter all night, reading a novel and speaking to her very kindly, but without betraying any excessive sentimentality in his voice.” (Narayan, 1955: 83) The mother, who is not of scientific bent, believes in the Evil Eye and her love for her daughter makes her impatient to the doctor’s procedure. She calls an exorcist as a last resort.
The reaction of the doctor to Susila's fever is now a well-known example of incongruity. P.S. Sundaram writes: "The doctor who treats Susila and in his ineptitude kills her is another unforgettable character. He imagines, without bothering to see the patient, that she must be suffering from malaria and treats her accordingly. Then he decides that she must be suffering from typhoid, but that does not worry him ..." (Sundaram, 1973: 59) He describes typhoid as a cobra and malaria as the elusive green snake - "But typhoid is the king among fevers - it is an aristocrat who observes the rules of the game. I'd rather trust a cobra than a green snake; you can depend upon the cobra to go its way if you understand its habits and moods... ." (1955:78) Sundaram comments: "This particular cobra goes its way and kills the patient: but no doubt the doctor was satisfied that he understood its habits and moods."(1973: 59)

Death is another question on which we hear different voices creating a dialogue. For Susila who suffered the pains of the mortal body in typhoid it is a transition to a higher plane where the body does not hinder the joys of the mind: "I'm essentially the same person as far as you and my dear ones are concerned, but the only difference is that
I'm without the encumbrance of the physical body and everything is finer and quicker than on earth." (Narayan, 1955: 131)

Krishna is benumbed at the first shock of his dear wife’s death. For him the whole process had been a gradual transformation from Susila to the patient and ultimately to a lifeless body. However, when nearing the end of her life Susila turns into a symbol for Krishna. Her stentorian breathing, he said: “appeared to me the creaking of the hinges of a prison gate, opening at the command of a soul going into freedom.” (Narayan, 1955: 94)

At the emotionally charged moment of bidding her body farewell, he takes resort in the diary, which enables him to communicate in a documentary style. A direct rendition would have opened the floodgates of emotion, but that would have blurred the truth about death, which is far more brazen and stark. Krishna’s diary is a montage, a conglomeration of various pictures. We see the child blissfully innocent of her mother’s death, parading in a sparkling green coat, surprised and happy with all the special attentions, while in a dark room lies the ‘inert form’, surrounded by three shattered human beings battling with intense pain of parting and a stubborn fatigue that disables them even from
expressing their woe. These three figures are surrounded by different layers of numerous other faces like the neighbours, relatives and friends who come with tears and lamentations, then the corpse bearers who perform their duties with deft professionalism, and again the passersby who stop for a moment and sigh, followed by the madman whose insanity gives him the licence to break the sanctimonious silence with his curses against fate. We have glimpses of all the vibrating colours of life like purple, saffron and vermilion that ironically enfold the corpse, vying with the black dots of flies that are the harbingers of decay. Krishna’s intense suffering is methodically nullified and negated by the practical scenario of people shouting, ordering and haggling on prices and quality of the materials used for the funeral. While Krishna’s mind is transformed into a moonbeam of symbolism, which, with a pathetic calm perceives the whole funeral ground as a “cloakroom, a place where you leave your body behind,” (Narayan, 1955: 96) the sun mercilessly and unspARINGLY chars everything that came his way.

It is this metaphysical notion of death that Krishna carries away from the funeral ground and so, when he hears of his dead wife’s communication with him through a medium, he accepts it at once. Thus
for him, in spite of all the pain it caused him, Death was not a disaster but only the other face of life. For the remaining chapters it is Krishna’s struggle to conceive the truth about the other face of life by trying to merge his personality totally and selflessly with the form of his wife.

But the debate on death does not end here. In spite of the blissful ending where, in the magical light of dawn engulfed by the heavenly aroma of jasmine, Krishna sees the ephemeral form of his beloved wife, it cannot be pronounced as the golden pot at the rainbow’s end. The very episodic nature of Narayan’s work that promises endless surprises, his preference for the heteroglossia that turns every utterance as double-voiced and polemical, and the overall dialogical approach to truth profess that the end is never the end. Krishna’s epiphanic vision of his dear wife that indicates the continuity of the soul in afterlife is not the final truth that the writer wishes to convey because he has countermanded it with the schoolmaster’s stoical acceptance of death as a dead end: “It is all a matter of personal faith and conviction. But I am not interested in the life after death. I have no opinion either way. There may be a continuation in other spheres, under other conditions, or there may not be. It is immaterial to me. The only reality I recognize is death.
To me it is nothing more than a full stop. I have trained myself to view it with calm.” (Narayan, 1955: 163)

Bakhtin could never imagine single-toned human significance, and this view applies to all the writers including Narayan who hold a dialogic world-view. These writers show their inclination to support the free play of heteroglossia in their works, for heteroglossia, being open to difference and contradiction, truly portrays the increasing tide of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is never moulded or complete, but is a process of being and becoming, it is always dialogic.

II

Dialogism is not a textual or inter-textual phenomenon, but reaches beyond the text to embrace the social world as a whole. Dialogism is created by social heteroglossia. Bakhtin considered the novel form to be the most appropriate medium for the expression of the dialogic relations of a society, as this form has the elasticity to accommodate different styles, languages and genres. The novel form that embraces the wider dynamics of heteroglossia, Bakhtin names – ‘the polyphonic novel’.
Thus, while dialogism and heteroglossia are more general terms, the world polyphony is specifically applied to the novel.

Social heteroglossia provides the novel very significantly the dialogizing background that helps interaction between text and context. Social heteroglossia, according to Michael Gardiner, saturates the words and thoughts of characters and author alike with a ‘fundamental speech diversity’. Gardiner continues to explain that this internal dialogism is never subject to ultimate resolution or closure, as we have seen in our analysis of R.K. Narayan’s *The English Teacher*. Again it cannot be reduced to mere conversation or extant dialogue. In order to comprehend the nature of the polyphonic novel and the dynamics of heteroglossia in the novel, it is therefore necessary to understand the way polyphony works as a basis of the novelist’s worldview that he structures in an effort to provide the narrative an artistic vision.

Polyphony basically is a sign of laughter, precisely because it disrupts the author’s hegemony and allows the free play of several other voices too. Adopting the polyphonic style is like laughing on the face of the presumptuousness and egocentricity of man who is constantly evolving towards a center. This centralized monologic world, the
moment the carnival spirit of social laughter surfaces, vanishes like a bubble in a mountain stream. If laughter liberates man, the polyphonic novel liberates and de-reifies human being by revealing those aspects of his personality that cannot be shown by the traditional monologic style of writing.

Bakhtin introduces us to this totally different kind of artistic vision, which may be named as 'the polyphonic vision' through his analysis of Dostoevsky’s works. Defending Dostoevsky’s novels, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky’s work “does not fit any of the preconceived frameworks or historico-literary schemes that we usually apply to various species of the European novel.” (quoted in Morris, 1994: 89) Taking his cue from Bakhtin, Pam Morris writes in his introduction to the second section of The Bakhtin Reader (1994): “It is Dostoevsky’s achievement to have envisaged human life in this unfinalizable way and to have found the artistic means of representing it. To do so he rejects any authorial excess of seeing and in a Copernican revolution of novelistic form he centers the whole novel upon the interactive consciousness of characters.” (in Morris, 1994: 88)
Given the freedom the “interactive consciousness of characters” open up the complexities and dilemmas, and specially the gaps and fissures that cause the multi-levelled commotion during the eruptive stages in history. Dostoevsky, writing within such anxieties of the time which saw the breakdown of polite society and patriarchal forms, at an age that was incubating the birth of a more brazen era of proletariat revolutions, and despite his own ideological vacillations, very successfully opened up to the epoch. The very novel use of the polyphonic style saved Dostoevsky from a narrow expression of his own political conservatism. It may be noted that Dostoevsky’s own political agenda never surface in his works as the very structure of the polyphonic novel has declawed them. This apparently supports the formalist’s claim that the text is a world on its own, quite apart from the author who writes it. However, Bakhtin’s dialogics of language explores more possibilities in the claim of truth than the formalists could achieve. Bakhtin neither agrees that the text that uses the same social language for expression estranges itself from social and contextual connotations, nor does he prescribe that the text be explained through simple biographical clues or psychoanalysis. Bakhtin’s dialogics projects
language as generative, bearing the genetic signals of past connotations, present situational constructions and future transformations. Thus the author becomes part of a greater dialogue, an instrument in the hands of the dialogic force. This is not to say that the author loses his own integrity. The author’s consciousness, while facing other equally valid consciousnesses, is disrobed of his own bias or predisposition and a more egalitarian system is created. This is especially true of writers who are not visual, painterly or analytic, but those who center their writings on the interactive consciousnesses of the social man. To such writers, truth is never a personal accomplishment or realization, but always mediated.

Bakhtin’s dialogics brings about a significant shift of authorial position, which is brought on the same plane as that of the characters of the novel. This goes along with a significant shift from seeing to hearing. In order to comprehend the significance of such a shift we may analyse it thus – when an author gives an excessive effort to the description of his characters, rounding up with authorial comments and ideas, it is a tendency of monologising, and in his scrupulousness for creating a perfect and clear whole he leaves no scope for the creation to
grow on its own. But when we close our eyes to this world of distinct forms and open our ears instead, we hear the soul — mysterious, unifinalizable and ever evolving, the soul with echoes of the past and visions of the future, all at once integrated in it. Dostoevsky realized this and evolved a new novelistic form that situates the interactive voices in the narrative resulting in polyphony. The polyphonic world of the novel redirects the mind from a dialectically linear pattern and situates it in an amalgamation of subjects like an orchestra underpinning interaction and co-existence. It creates a space that manifests a simultaneous viewing of all at a time, encompassing diversities and relativities. Therefore a novel written with such a world-view cannot be truly judged with the help of the characteristic format of plot construction and characterization as these require pragmatic linkages at the story level and an all-encompassing authorial knowledge for a well-developed character. In order to understand Dostoevsky, Bakhtin argues, the focal point of the critic should be different.

Like Dostoevsky, R.K. Narayan too was born in a disturbed era when Indian history saw great socio-political upheavals and ideological tug-of-war. Narayan started writing at a time (His first novel Swami and
Friends was published in 1935) when Tagore had already won the Nobel Prize (1913). His illustrious contemporaries were Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. It was a time both grim and glorious as India was still gasping under British imperialism. However, the struggle against imperialism and the consolidated effort towards freedom prompted Tagore to say: “… just as sandalwood, when gashed, emits its fragrance, India also has laid bare her inmost treasure of truth, has offered her best self, whenever she has been struck by outsiders.” (Tagore, 1911) This missionary zeal and apocalyptic vision had infected many Indians who plunged into the freedom struggle. The Indian scenario was throbbing with high idealism and this sway of idealism also registered tremendous revisionary cultural activities as a corollary to the freedom movement. Indians passionately followed Gandhi’s teachings and Nehru’s leadership. The writers of the time, both as visionaries and reformists were trying to capture the turbulent period giving momentum to cultural, social or political issues. A number of autobiographies, which were success stories of the individual struggle for self-improvisation or enlightenment, had come out. The radical Indians, with some British help, had opened schools for women; women’s emancipation was in,
and ladies of aristocratic families were daring to come out of their
*purdahs*.

It is quite surprising for many critics that at that enlightened age, among the high-sounding hubbubs of diverse idealistic activities, Narayan’s first novel *Swami and Friends* was like a snowflake floating upon wildfire. While his contemporary Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) narrates the serious conflict of nationalist upsurge and conservative orthodoxy, and Mulk Raj Anand’s hapless protagonist Bakha’s spiritual resurrection depended on Gandhi’s speech in *The Untouchable* (1935), little Swami’s childhood passed serenely under the shady trees of Malgudi. Why was Narayan so composed in the midst of the ferment; the fiery pre-independence struggles and the organized social reformation? How could Narayan depict village cricket matches, adolescent love and petty household quarrels? Even Gandhi’s presence in many of his novels is too unimposing to be noticed.

This apparent indifference of Narayan to greater causes has certainly left critics with some embarrassment. This is clear from our overall observation of Narayan-criticism where we find either a total avoidance of such queries, or a brazen reaction that Narayan as an artist
is not worth much attention. One such example is Ramesh Shrivastava, who finds Narayan’s language devoid of the “minimum sustaining rhetoric” which shows a total “artistic bankruptcy”. Narayan’s insensitivity to the National cause hurts and puzzles Shrivastava: “It seems unbelievable that throughout the intensity of sufferings and tortures during the British rule over India and the pangs of the independence movement, Narayan should have remained completely unaffected and that his imagination should find no job but to churn out humorous books for children and common people without any reference to the contemporary events.” (in Ram, 1981: 207) The only broader awareness of the colonial situation that critics repeatedly identify in Narayan’s novels is the disastrous Western influence which penetrates the lives of common men and render them confused, and that Narayan very successfully turns comic.

On the other hand, the critics, who appreciate Narayan fail to place Narayan in the greater context of world literature. Narayan is appreciated for his humanism. Warren French writes: “The humanist is marked by a sense of the human drive and capacity for self-realisation and a placid acceptance of its frequent frustration, a sense that Narayan
possesses to a degree that I find equalled only by William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Thorton Wilder.” (in Ram, 1981: xiii) Apart from this abrupt comparison, the generic equations of these writers with Narayan are not dealt with any further. Describing Narayan’s artistic vision, Shiv Kumar Gilra writes: “The basic humanity of this vision accepts life in its totality. Incongruities idiosyncrasies, follies and foibles of human nature amuse him, and with a merry twinkle in his eye he transmutes them into the staple of his writing.” (in Ram, 1981: 47) This comment also applies to writers like Shakespeare, Cervantes or Mark Twain, and Bakhtin traces this humanism to its roots – to the language of laughter in folk tradition or the amoral atmosphere in carnivals. Thus, we find that Narayan is not a puzzle amidst the revisionary and motivated activities in pre and post-independent India, but the torchbearer of a special genre which very effectively plays a role at the turning points of history, in realizing a more comprehensive truth about that era, by including the subaltern participants of history in his depiction.

Again, Narayan’s world has rightly been compared with the ‘newspaper world’ or ‘crowded bazaar’, where the varieties of life are
brought within a single space. Critics have been quite sensitive to the ambivalence showing up in his world. O.P. Mathur finds that while dealing with his characters Narayan’s attitude is highly ambivalent – which is apparent in the sympathy and irony crystallized in Raju: “The author’s highly ambivalent attitude noticeable in the sympathy and irony with which almost every major character is treated, is crystallised in his treatment of Raju.” (in Ram, 1981: 31)

The openness as well as the absence of any commanding and commenting authorial presence or any pedagogic endeavour too has not gone unnoticed. O.P. Mathur writes: “As an ironist he perceives the truth and falsity of both simultaneously and leaves it to the reader to arrive at his own solution.” (in Ram, 1981: 32) Atma Ram, in his introduction to Perspectives on R.K. Narayan writes about Narayan’s technique: “He avoids authorial comments and employs irony as a vision, not as a device. His humour is never satirical. He tries to offer an objective viewpoint and includes comments as a part of description and narration.” (in Ram, 1981: xxv) Further, Shiv Kumar Gilra maintains that Narayan’s work: “… is free from motives, purposes or ‘axes’ of any kind. He never set out to be a missionary, crusader or reformer.”
Interestingly, these very qualities often turn against Narayan, for when compared with Raja Rao or Anand, Narayan is found lacking in motivation. Puzzles haunts the lines of many critics like Rameshwar Gupta: “looking at Narayan the artist one cannot be sure about his real attitude.” (in Ram, 1981: 56) Narayan’s detachment is often seen as a lack of commitment on his part. Ramesh Shrivastava writes: “How one wishes that Narayan, too, like Mark Twain, had sweetened the bitterest truths of life, coated with laughter the pangs and sufferings of a subjugated and dumb race, and had given as a joke a slap or a stab that otherwise might have drawn a punitive action from the foreign rulers.” (in Ram, 1981: 207) But from Bakhtianian point of view Narayan’s ‘detachment’ is not a lack of concern for the ‘subjugated race’, but a strategy of not providing guidance to the common peoples’ voices or thrusting his own ideas or viewpoints on them. Narayan lets them talk for themselves, and in the process a far more bitter truth is exposed than the ‘bitter truth’ referred to by Shrivastava. British imperialism and colonial subjugation of Indians may be a bitter truth, but the half-conscious instinctive life of the common man in India following the ebb and flow of life, unconcerned to the nationalist
struggle may be a truth which is harder to digest. Thus, what seems as a lack in Narayan or considered as “his monumental ignorance, his absence of courage or a tactful withdrawal from confrontation …” (in Ram, 1981: 208) is actually an effort at a deeper understanding of the human situation with a humility that renders his narrative style so deceptively unassuming. This simplicity and limited pattern in his use of language and style too has earned him both praise and criticism. While Meenakshi Mukherjee eulogizes the lack of ‘purple patches’ in Narayan’s style which she finds very appropriate in depicting his simple honesty of vision, Ramesh Shrivastava names it as his incapacity to write a multidimensional prose. Narayan’s world is not an intense electrifying world where a grasping story and dynamic characters evolve towards a cathartic height, but it is a world that allows everybody to be his/her own on a canvas that is spacious and problematic without intervention. The dynamism that holds the narrative follows the least authorial presence/intervention with a view that stories need not be told, they must emerge from interactive conflicts. Thus the story does not determine the characters; instead individual stories commanded by characters develop into a story that is
primarily situational and open-ended. Narayan remembers in his autobiography: “The general criticism was that my stories lacked ‘plot’.” (Narayan, 1974: 100) Critics fond of his writing like K. Viswanatham have tried to find out why Narayan evoked such lukewarm response: “... why do critics say that Narayan is not a committed writer?” (in Ram, 1981: 183) Viswanatham rightly comes to the point: “That is because the critics have not understood the nature of laughter.” (in Ram, 1981: 183) Though critics might have apparently pointed out certain aspects of Narayan in assessing his works, their evaluations by and large have remained academicist, not a holistic investigation. As a result, reaction to his works has been extreme. Criticism on Narayan is either a sort of indulgent nod to his humanism, his restricted wandering in the follies and foibles of the middleclass, his deceptively plain language and style, or a resistance in perceiving him as a writer of any serious consideration.

In placing Narayan’s work in the Bakhtinian framework of polyphony and the carnival theory, one may find his interaction with his time, his grasp on reality more comprehensive than many committed writers. This is because the writers with a mission either channelize the
contents of their material through their very personal socio-political orientation and ideology or use the canonized narrative strategy to project reality. While canonization limits and universalizes reality, for both Bakhtin and Narayan reality is not static, as it is part of the interminable flow of time.

Besides, the subalterns of society, the simple and economically underprivileged people whose lives are a constant struggle for the bare necessities, are the most unbiased and spontaneous characters on whose lives time has the least impact as they hardly bother about fame, status and salvation. On the other hand, their intellectual counterparts are in a constant pursuit of the eternal. Narayan hailed these simple people into his world as he realized the importance of the mass, who In spite of the highflying idealistic zeals of the intellectuals, nonetheless constitute a world that is eternal beyond contradictory individual aspirations.

Illuminating examples of the ‘inter-subjectivity’ of meaning (as Ken Hirschkop names Bakhtin’s ‘dialogism’ in language) may be cited from Narayan’s novels. Monologic writers, using the epic time-scheme churn and put into order the chaos of life towards certain static valuational uniformity, be it personal or political. They usually use the
self-centred epic language in which the writer’s words are the last words about meaning. But dialogism is not merely speech but about the two-sided aspects of meaning which Bakhtin calls ‘double-voiced’. It is not in any sense, according to Ken Hirschkop necessarily about two people, but refers to the space between expression and understanding. This space is the very condition of meaningful utterances. Narayan, in his multi-voiced novels, provides this space by stratification of the unified national sentiment of pre and post-independent India into a multiplicity of life-positions, consciousnesses and individual expressions, without any attempt to command or control them with his own idiosyncrasies, if he had any. As a result, the various social positions and contexts are relativized and the dialogic meaning emerges. Dialogism renders meaning as ever evolving and unfinalizable, as it takes into account the various ever-shifting socio-historical facts and does not depend on perennial metaphysical norms.

Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), which uses the name of the great Gandhi in its title, provides a very interesting example of dialogism and polyphony. Practically, any of Narayan’s works may be cited for this purpose, but this work is chosen for illustration precisely
because it uses a world-famous name that has tuned into a legend. Using such a legend in a novel would naturally compel writers to be piously true to the principles that stand for Gandhi, because Gandhi is not merely a protagonist in India’s struggle for independence but a name which stands for the universal meaning, the perennial values that is India in the view of the world. What writers normally do is merely transcribe the legend into their fictional world. But the relation of carnivalesque literature to legends, according to Bakhtin is deeply critical or dialogic and not of blind acceptance. The dialogism is brought about by a rejection of stylistic unity and multiplicity of tone. Double-voiced words and oxymoronic combination of the high and the low, serious and comic, prosaic and poetic play a leading role.

The relativization of Gandhian principles in Narayan’s novel destroys the myth of Gandhi and critics have found the deglorification of Gandhi unacceptable. In The Swan and the Eagle, C.D. Narasimhaiah expresses his doubt about the authenticity of the Gandhian principle in the novel and thinks that Narayan has made a muddle of it. Supporting him A.N. Kaul writes: “... to the extent to which it is a political novel ... it ‘hasn’t enlarged our awareness of Gandhi or his era one bit’ and
that Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* are incomparably superior ‘Gandhi Novels’ ... ’” (in Sundaram, 1973: 83)

This is an extremely interesting example of the confusion regarding the scheme of the *Waiting* that is often marked out by readers and critics as a Gandhi novel like *Kanthapura* or *Untouchable*. But, as we have stated before, Narayan’s novels do not follow a definite scheme but project life as an amalgamation of different life-positions and the protagonists in his works, instead of developing with time, are thrown from one situation to another. The novels have no scope for the heroic or the ideal for they need the epic-time-scheme for exposition. Here the heroic and ideal get confused and dissolved with the quotidian. The randomness of experience that we find in Narayan’s novels is true to the life led by the common man, a life that is not goal oriented but lived in moments. In such a world of short-sighted protagonists even a towering figure like Gandhi is restructured and redefined, as it happened in the story of the blind men and the elephant. Though Narayan brings the figure of Gandhi, his polyphony decentres him.

Thus, the effort to categorize *Waiting* with other monologic Gandhi-novels proves disastrous and Narayan’s credibility as a novel-
The irony of any form of creation is that the moment it is begotten it steps out of the creator's very personal world into a chaotic world criss-crossed with diverse consciousnesses and orientations. In the process it acquires diverse images and colours, often to such an extent that the creator himself finds it alien to his own consciousness. In *My Dateless Diary* Narayan relates such an experience with humour. While travelling through America, Narayan was often riddled with questions of multifarious angles about his novels, which were fired at him by students, friends and even strangers. He writes: "It gave me an odd feeling to reflect that a book written in a joy and hopefulness in that lonely splendour of my home in Yadavagiri should now be turning up to plague me." (Narayan, 1964: 49)
Again, it is doubly ironical that readers and critics who receive the creation tend to stop this process of evolution by compartmentalizing it or forcefully fitting it into pre-conceived formula. This leads to its death.

Thus, Narayan's *Waiting* has been compartmentalized by many critics as a ‘political novel’, and finding it inadequate for such a status they reject it as a pointless work, weak in motivation, etc. and therefore, as suggested by C.D. Narasimhaiah, should be withdrawn by the author.

*Waiting* is a novel that may misguide the reader from the beginning by virtue of its very title. The reader would start reading with an expectation of a theme of waiting for political and social salvation and the great Mahatma's all-pervading presence in the novel. But the novel starts with an ordinary day in the life of a very ordinary adolescent boy Sriram.

Sriram is an orphan brought-up by his grandma. He is weak in his studies, lazy, slightly spoilt. He spends his days lazing on his windowsill. It is, however, quite apparent that Narayan’s heroes and heroines are ordinary people with ordinary vices and virtues, strengths
and weaknesses, beauty and flaws. Often there is no gulf between the hero and the villain, or it may be said that there is no hero and there is no villain, as the two concepts fuse and overlap. But the point which is most important about them, is that they are free from the burden of achieving some extraordinary feat, or creating that electrically charged field of sympathy around them that would deeply stir the readers’ emotions. They do not seem to be images created to fulfill any certain scheme on the part of the writer. They are there as part of the everyday hubbub of Malgudi, often the more boldly outlined figures in the picture of a crowd, as we see in *The Guide*, where Raju’s life evolves from one sort of crowd into another. Because of this ordinariness or lack of distinction, readers often find them lacking in punch. But this was Narayan’s artistic perception – he could represent life only in the category of co-existence. His heroes can live only by co-existing with numerous other existences. In his world there is no scope for the lonely individual walking the path of his creator’s design.

This point strikes home more clearly if we compare Narayan’s *Waiting* with Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935). The touching story of the gracefully written *Untouchable* sets the mood of the reader
from the beginning with its very title. The reader knows beforehand that
the story is going to be about some member of the lowest cast in India.

The reader’s mind is now set to share some hideous nightmare of
humiliation suffered by the victims of the orthodox Hindu society. In
case of the Indian reader, the awareness of such grim reality is already
there in his consciousness. Gandhi’s life-long mission for the
eradication of such social prejudices is known to the world and
automatically his presence looms over the educated reader’s
consciousness from the beginning. In that sense it is a really well
written “Gandhi novel”.

In the Untouchable Bakha, a street-sweeper boy, experiences
several humiliations in a single day which moves the reader deeply and
the reader starts wishing the embalming presence of Gandhi to illumine
Bakha’s life and afford him peace and tranquility. The reader is not
disappointed in his expectation. At first it is the soothing touch of the
Salvationist: “Tum udas,” said the colonel, putting his hand on Bakha’s
shoulder.’ (Anand, 1935: 137) But Christ is alien to Bakha, and he soon
gets bored by Colonel Hutchingson’s recitations on Christ. This is
immediately followed by Gandhi’s speech which goes to Bakha’s heart
directly, embalming the injuries deep within. Gandhi said: “I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition.” (Anand, 1935: 164) Hard upon this comes the poet’s modernist solution – the idea of the flush system, relieving the untouchable of the indignity of attending to the public utility system. E.M. Forster, in his introduction to the Untouchable writes that he finds it straightforward and very convincing.

The necessary climax is achieved. Bakha returns a different person, reflecting on Gandhi and the machine, and the reader knows that the next day in Bakha’s life would be more tolerable.

This novel is linear in pattern, evolving from one point to a different one. We are aware of the author’s scheme and the sensitive and thwarted Bakha, with his silent questions and anger, successfully serves as the writer’s mouthpiece. The novel is certainly monologic in its orientation.
Considering the protagonists of both *Untouchable* and *Waiting*, we find that both Anand’s Bakha and Narayan’s Sriram are almost of the same age and represent the average Indian. But Sriram’s position in society is more or less affluent and he affords the luxury of falling in love and pursuing his beloved throughout the novel. Yet, it is not the love of a hero of stature that would wring the reader’s heart but rather it provokes a smile of condescension, as one would, if one’s neighbour’s son falls in love. Sriram, throughout the novel, remains as a part of his surroundings – the people of Malgudi. There is not a single spark of any individual tenet in his personality.

Bakha of the *Untouchable* could have been part of a crowd too, like his brother or friends – callous, resigned and considerably happy. But that was not what his creator wanted him to be. So, from the beginning he is marked out as totally different from the rest. The writer draws his physique – his broad and sensitive face and his graceful torso with great care and love. He stands apart with his peculiar oversized English dress. He is like an artist who can do the meanest of jobs like cleaning the latrines with the utmost grace. Throughout the novel he is the alienated individual dragging his sensitive soul with him.
On the other hand, we may note while reading Narayan’s novel that he never tries to describe Sriram. Throughout the novel Sriram is a voice – sometimes the inner voice and often the outer, the louder one. Thus he is left to our imagination, never to be finalized.

When we shift our attention to the story of *Waiting*, we see that there is nothing much in it. It is a simple story of an average boy falling in love with one of Gandhi’s followers. The boy is dazed, uncertain, and awkward: the girl is intelligent, quick-witted and slightly flirtatious. There is no real tension or drama as their love is mutual from the beginning. Only the wedding waits for the permission of Gandhi. But the boy-girl affair is not the whole novel.

Considering the title we may shift our attention to the Mahatma. We can now say, without hesitation that *Waiting* is not a “Gandhi novel” in the sense the *Untouchable* is. Here, unlike Anand’s Gandhi who appears as a legend, an oracle, the Mahatma stands in a dialogic relation with the people of Malgudi. This kind of relation brings out several facets, nuances and possibilities, which have been ignored or overlooked by history. Narayan brings the image of Gandhi among diverse and contradictory elements, the image thus entering into various
relationships with other life-positions, and the result is there for us to consider.

This comes out clear if we compare and contrast the public rally of Gandhi in *Waiting* with that described in the *Untouchable*. In the *Untouchable* the meeting comes at the end as a climax to the daylong agony and humiliation of Bakha. In *Waiting*, it comes at the beginning. Both Bakha and Sriram attend the meetings eagerly, but for different purposes.

While wandering near the railway station, Bakha learns about the meeting which was about to be held. “The word ‘Mahatma’ was like a magical magnet, to which he, like all the other people about him, rushed blindly.” (Anand, 1935: 151) The whole experience acted as a catharsis; as if, at last, he was included in the fold of humanity. The writer describes: “Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody’s mind, including Bakha’s. Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi.” (Anand, 1935: 153)

The picture of a crowd rushing blindly, intoxicated by the name of Gandhi is as true as history. In *Waiting* there is a similar description:
“There was a general rush forward, and a number of volunteers began pushing back the crowd, imploring people not to choke the space around the platform.” (Narayan 1958: 33)

Though apparently similar, a close look brings out a wide difference between the two rally scenes. In the Untouchable the author looks down at the crowd from behind a photographer’s lens while in Waiting the writer is only one among the crowd, the heterogenous crowd, listening to the cacophony of sounds produced by them. Even the status of Bakha and Sriran is different. While Bakha is the focal point of the writer, “Sriram was a tiny speck” (Narayan, 1958: 24) among the huge crowd that waited for Gandhi. In Untouchable the writer pleases our mental eye by describing the crowd in a picturesque manner and we feast on the conglomeration of silks and khadis, reds and blues and whites, men and women, Hindus and Muslims and Europeans, Lallas and beggars. It is a colourful crowd with a single voice shouting “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai.”

There are occasional conversations among men but they are about Gandhi and politics. Now, do these intellectual debates represent the whole spirit of the crowd? Is each and every Indian educated in politics?
This sort of pragmatic unity in diversity is not there in the crowd in *Waiting*. We are not mesmerized by its picturesque quality. Instead we listen to it and even the tiniest odd sound knocks at our minds door and a totally different idea about the crowd rises before us. If the scene in the *Untouchable* stands as a perfectly drawn picture, the other is a tongue-in-cheek question to it. Instead of a crowd with a single mind, we find it to be a battleground of contradictions. There is the heat of the sun and the chromium microphone hollering at the crowd. There are the busy-bodies asking people to remain calm, loquacious volunteers going about with great self-importance, the uncomplaining crowd waiting, keeping up a steady babble punctuated by the pop of the soda bottles or the subdued tone of the cucumber vendor. “Every ten minutes someone started a canard that the great man had arrived, and it created a stir in the crowd. It became a joke, something to relieve the tedium of waiting. Any person, a microphone fitter or a volunteer, who dared to cross the dais was greeted with laughter and booing from a hundred thousand throats.” (Narayan, 1958: 25) To Sriram, Gandhi’s meeting was the place where he hoped to find the beautiful girl. Sitting there, his mind wandered in a maze, in the style of cinematic montage, from the
khaddar clad volunteers to the police, from the pop of the soda bottles to the alluring call of the cucumber vendor. “Waiting for the Mahatma makes one very thirsty” (Narayan, 1958: 25) – Sriram thought. Again, when his wandering eyes fall on the khaddar caps his thoughts are almost anti-climactic: “That khaddar store of the Market Fountain must have done a roaring business in white caps today.” (Narayan, 1958: 26) All these are dialogically set against the great Mahatma’s coming. The whole situation is double-voiced and polyphonic.

At last Gandhi enters the scene. In Untouchable, it is the all too well-known scene – the showered flower petals, the garlands, the “little great” man huddled up between two ladies, swathed in a white blanket, his clean shaven head, protruding ears, expansive forehead, long nose bridged by a pair of glasses. It is the familiar pose of the numerous sketches of Gandhi. The scene almost comes out of the newspaper or a documentary film.

On the other hand, in Waiting Gandhi’s entrance is signified just by a sudden lull of the babbling crowd. This lull is followed by an outburst of sarcastic comments on the chameleon-like qualities of Mr.

In *Untouchable*, there is a long uninterrupted speech delivered by Gandhi. The speech almost comes out of a page from his autobiography. It has a monologic, theoretical, finalized quality about it. But the scenario and atmosphere is different in Narayan’s novel. Here, the Mahatma tries to coax the crowd to join him in a harmonious clapping of hands and chanting ‘Raghupati Raghava’. The crowd is flabbergasted, and after much persuasion, some puzzled, half-hearted and hesitant attempts are made, and it is quite sometime before the expected effect is achieved. But does not this humorous scene evoke in our minds questions, which threaten to unsettle our complacent idea about the people of India in relation to Gandhi? It is true that the charisma of Gandhi could mesmerize and more the crowd to his will, but in a world inhabited by diversely motivated and selfishly oriented subjects, is the organization and momentum of a revolution as easy as our school history books would like us to believe?

When Gandhi speaks to the crowd, his utterances are constantly interrupted by diverse voices coming from the crowd and thus Gandhi’s
ideas appear in a constant struggle among several individual consciousnesses, and turns into a living dialogue. Sriram is one representative of this heterogeneous crowd. He is all along torn between his awe and respect for the Mahatma and his own attention wandering away towards the women in the crowd. He remembers Gandhi’s speech on the previous day: “All women are your sisters and mothers. Never look at them with thoughts of lust.” (Narayan, 1958: 29) He tries to look away in the direction of men, but finding them most boring looks back and wonders: “So many sisters and mothers. I wish they would let me speak to them.” (Narayan, 1958: 30) He tries to justify himself: “Of course I have no evil thoughts in my mind at the moment.” (Narayan, 1958: 30) When his mind huddles up in the cozy warmth of the beautiful girls memory, his thoughts get mixed up with Gandhi’s speech. When Gandhi tells the crowd that they could get rid of the British only when they forgot bitterness and purified their hearts for love to reside, Sriram answers to himself: “Definitely its not bitterness. I love her.” (Narayan, 1958: 32) But this complaisance is not permanent. Gandhi is to him like the omniscient God and he is in constant fear of being found out by him.
In fact, the greater part of the novel stands on this dialogic relation between Gandhi’s teachings and the people. Sriram joins Gandhi’s volunteers in order to stay near Bharati. The Chairman hopes to become famous by letting Gandhi stay in his palatial house. The collector Mr. Natesh manages to get distinction with the borrowed glory of Gandhi by interpreting into Tamil Gandhiji’s speech. To Sriram’s granny Gandhi is a threat who weaned the youths away from their cozy comfortable homes to flirt with danger. Gandhi’s famous ‘Satyagrahas’ are nothing extraordinary to her. “It doesn’t matter”, she said, almost on the point of giggling. “How many years is it since I had a mouthful of food at night – must be nearly twenty years.” (Narayan, 1958: 83) Again, there are the businessmen who impartially contribute money to Gandhiji’s Harijan Fund as well as to the war-fund. The contractor who worshipped a portrait of Gandhi, which he hung on his wall, and gave five thousand to the Harijan Fund, contributes the same amount to the War Fund too. Bowing his head shyly he says to Sriram “I’m impartial; when the Governor himself comes and appeals how can we refuse? After all we are businessmen.” (Narayan, 1958: 108) There are also ardent followers of Gandhi like Bharati and Gorpad who would like to
lay down their lives for Bapuji; again, there are men like Jagadish who pervert Gandhi’s preachings to suit their own purposes. Thus each situation, each incident and each character stands questioning each other, and they are strong and isolated as ever. Narayan describes them in his characteristic style of irony and humour and the effect is double-voiced.

For example, when we see Gandhiji’s meeting followed by the Loyalists’ meeting with people waiting with equal enthusiasm, we are placed in a dilemma. Do not these people realize how opposed are these two meetings in principle? Do they possess any idealism at all? Do they really understand what Gandhi meant by non-violence? If so, how could they hail with equal joy a meeting that asked them to join the war? Or finally, are we to believe that while a small number of people take the responsibilities, a greater number callously live on, living for the moment. Perhaps, these meetings provide chances for the people of Malgudi to evade the boring routines of life and spend a day in spree?

When Sriram, with all seriousness tries picketing a shop selling English biscuits, he looks foolish and unreal. This is not Narayan’s view, but Narayan looks at him from the eyes of the people who
surround him to enjoy the scene. To them, Sriram’s serious efforts are monkey-like acrobatics, which divert them for the moment. When a little boy comes to fetch some snuff for his grandfather Sriram prevents him. The boy starts howling ... and the people try to pacify him by whispering: “Come and fetch your snuff after that fellow leaves.” (Narayan, 1958: 122)

Sensing the atmosphere Sriram gives up. He is dejected and starts thinking that Gandhi’s spinning-wheel, the hours Gandhi spent in walking, thinking and mortifying himself in various ways were pointless: “seeing the kind of people for whom it was intended”. (Narayan, 1958: 124) His dejection, too, seems funny to the reader who is already acquainted with his personal reason of joining the Congress. Thus the whole novel is polemical. Did India really understand the great man? Did Gandhi know how insensitive and muddleheaded many of his admirers were?

So, the novel is not wholly about Sriram’s passion for Bharati. It is also not a Gandhi novel like the *Untouchable*. It is even more than that. We see a totally different life passing by the Gandhi milieu, untouched by it and alien to it. It consists of Kanni the shopkeeper who
is kind and helpful towards Sriram but never lets go an opportunity when he could fleece some money out of him. In this life, granny continues to wait for the wayward grandson to settle down, fasts herself almost to death and magically resurrects. Superstition prevents granny from coming back to her own house from the cremation ground and she happily settles in Banares with other widows, and never looks back. Men like the family priest who exploits people’s superstition that Sanskrit ‘mantras’ are indispensable for this society, is feared and hated. At the same time, there are people like the Fund Office Manager, the doctor, Kanni’s shop assistant and neighbours who volunteer to help Sriram’s family without giving it a second thought. It is not known what they think of Gandhi, but they manage to exist in the novel in their own capacities.

Narayan’s unusual artistic vision, like that of Dostoevsky’s, helps him to create an artistic whole out of the heterogeneous and disparate material, which cannot be categorized or compartmentalized. Narayan presents the insignificant, overlooked areas of society in their multifariousness, totality and ambiguity. Perhaps Narayan’s grotesque presentation of Malgudi renders the hitherto fragmentary picture of
India true and complete. Narayan projects the ‘other India’, the villages, small towns where most of the people live, which may have been hidden behind the façade of the ‘Great India’ upheld by writers and historians. The objective here is clear enough to take into account all these faceless characters and multiple voices.

Narayan’s grotesque world-view has the elasticity to accept, and explore the ambivalence of life, and this initiates the depiction of life not as a harmonious unity, but as a battleground of diverse and contradictory tendencies and pursuits. Polyphony in a novel initiates a carnival spirit, a subversive surge within its structure, on the face of which the official truth established by mainstream literature loses ground. With its language of laughter, this literary tradition rises beyond the black and white official world, fearless enough to lay bare its weaknesses and black spots along with its laudable qualities, humble enough to laugh at itself along with others. Thus, while the bulk of serious literature, including the great biographies and autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi, and works by Devendranath Tagore and Ranindranath Tagore sought to unify Indian consciousness amidst imperialistic anarchy through ways of religio-cultural visions or socio-
political ideologies, Narayan's world plunged straightforward into the anarchy and chaos that history created. It is the 'other India' consisting of the common man that gave in to the bourgeoisie and capitalism imported by the British traders. The result of this bourgeois influence was the bursting of previous feudal hierarchical value systems, philistine sentimentalism and patriarchal idyllic relations. The growth of the market, the rise of demand for commodities, commerce and railway communication brought with it a new world-view which shamelessly nurtured greed, exploitation and selfishness. Narayan's world, we find, swarms with cunning shopkeepers, exploiting priests, loquacious railway guides, and greedy filmmakers. Critics have aptly shown the growth of this new imported capitalism within the old feudal framework of Malgudi society.

Raju of The Guide, encashing his own talent for rhetoric metamorphoses from one role to another, pursuing love, money and glamour. Margaya of The Financial Expert exploits the ignorance of the rural people and turns into a money-minting machine. Sampath of Mr. Sampath is an attractive character, versatile and helpful, but in a move that may be called a tragic flaw leaves his own peaceful niche in the
press and runs after the glamour world of filmmaking, which ruins him. In *The Maneater of Malgudi* Vasu is a perfect representative of the capitalist man, as he held no other relation worth consideration beyond the consideration of money. He is a talented artist, but in his blunt commercialism he explodes the previous myth of the artist as a man of high mental aspirations. Thus in Narayan’s world man is exposed in his raw, who responds to the call of his bodily and material drives. It is not that this world is devoid of the higher aspirations of religious, social or political values, but the space or gap that creates the polemics between these opposite drives is the true rhetoric of Narayan’s works. This ‘dialogism’ in a polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin calls it, invokes questions on the nature of human life. Is life a uni-dimensional phenomenon or a dialectical move from birth to death? Or is it energy, which is constantly at odds with the pulls and drives of other energies? Narayan’s unique world-view destroys the organic unity of the material world, and thus in his works the scope for the manifestation of dialogic truth is created. Narayan found truth not in static forms (like myths, legends or other cultural motifs) but in the energy that goes behind the creation of new forms (the flux of historical reality). In order to understand this idea one
needs to go back to Socratic dialogue. Socrates believed that truth is not
born or does not reside in the head of an individual; it is born out of the
polemics of different positions. Bakhtin considered the Socratic
dialogue as one of the forebears of the modern novel. This polemics
pervades Narayan’s world. He found that no amount of Gandhian
spiritualism, Tagore’s distrust of bourgeoisie and call for self-
purification or Mulk Raj Anand’s concern for the exploited could stop
the India swept away by the imported virus of capitalism. It
decentralizes human life, which turns unpredictable and unredeemable.
Narayan’s double-voiced novels unearth the inner contradiction that was
latent in the colonial situation of India. An example from Waiting would
perfectly illustrate this inner contradiction: “In his rally, Gandhi
addresses the people of Malgudi and asks them to purify their hearts
before asking the British to leave the shores of India.” (Narayan, 1958:
32) This speech turns equivocal as it is addressed to an audience
submerged in the struggle for their bare existence and knows only that it
is the strong, the powerful and the cunning that will survive. The kind of
sentiment, which upholds the power of love, fills the pages of Gandhi’s
autobiography. We hear an echo of it even in Tagore: “The Disease and
its Cure”, written in 1907 ... “we must denounce our sins and not our
‘self-sacrifice’ and ‘self effacement’ were polemicized by greed,
exploitation, opportunism and selfishness. This latent contradiction is
interestingly explored by Narayan through his polyphonic technique that
provides scope for the play of heteroglossia. In the Gandhi rally in
Waiting we find khadi shops, cucumber and soda water vendors
exploiting the situation of a great gathering which Gandhi’s presence
has provided, and therefore enjoying a booming sale. With all his
respect for Gandhi, Narayan could see the paradoxes and ironies in the
world and lives of the average Indian. Supported by his carnivalesque
world-view, his grotesque and multi-voiced characters, Narayan
initiates a greater freedom and clarity of expression, which effortlessly
conveyed the bitter truths about individuals, and society of a particular
time in India.

WORKS CITED


