

In The Name of God

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**The Notion of Bakhtinian Polyphony in the Novel of *The
Name of the Rose***

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To:

My family especially

Arash and Amir, whom I love more than anyone in my life

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Abstract

The notion of Bakhtinian Polyphony in the novel of *The Name of the Rose*

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Polyphony is a new concept which was introduced to the realm of literary criticism when Bakhtin's works started to be known in the 1960s; then it obtained a special status in analyzing the postmodernist fiction. This thesis explores the relationship between Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel and postmodernist fiction's desire towards plurality. It traces the notions of heteroglossia, Carnivalsque, unfinalizability, and polyphony in *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. So it gets a dialogic approach towards the novel. Through incorporating heteroglossia and using unfinalizable characters it creates a plurality of voices interacting with each other. The answers to the questions posed by the study illustrate that *The Name of the Rose*, as an example of postmodern fiction, uses polyphony to embody the postmodern ideas of plurality of discourse and coexistence of worlds; it explores that the polyphony of voices would become polyphony of worlds.

Keywords: Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Unfinalizability, Carnivalsque, Polyphonic novel, Postmodernism

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. General Overview

“... There can be neither a first nor a last meanings; [anything that can be understood] always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real. In historical life this chain continues infinitely, and therefore each individual link in it is renewed again and again, as though it were being reborn.” Bakhtin, “*From note made in 1970-71*”

This thesis tries to analyze Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* through an examination of Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony and other related notions such as heteroglossia, carnival, and unfinalizability. The study aims to examine Bakhtin’s ideas through the postmodern fiction. Bakhtin was a Russian literary critic and semiotician whose ideas cover a wide range of domains. *The Name of the Rose* is written by Umberto Eco who is one of the most prominent scholars in postmodernist literature; he is an Italian literary critic who is a leading expert in semiotics. Therefore the technique of analysis is equally divided between a close study of Eco’s novel as an postmodern novel and a close examination of Bakhtin’s thoughts.

Bakhtin’s ideas on the nature of language revolutionized the realm of linguistics and literary criticism positioning him at the apogee of postmodern theory on fiction. Bakhtin’s main interest is in the novel genre, and especially in the ways that the voices which compose any novel’s text interrupt the authority of the author’s single voice. He finds the novel to be most effective instrument of exploiting and strengthening innate heteroglossia of language. From his viewpoint, the meaning of any text is based on what was already said and what follows it so there is no final meaning since no word is neutral and it reflects ever changing historical and social milieu. According to Bakhtin no word’s meaning is independent but it strictly depends on how it will be received by the addressee. Hence, language is dialogic since it interacts with what already has come and anticipates a response. This dialogic nature of language is called dialogism though Bakhtin never named it as such. With Bakhtin, for the first time the reader took an important role in meaning making. As he noted in *Speech Genres*,

Orientation of the word towards the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser

and addressee. Each and every word expresses 'one' in relation to the 'other.'

(p. 86)

Bakhtin, unlike the Formalists of his time, emphasized the relationship between text and readers through structuring a connection between words and their meanings according to specific social and historical contexts. For him, a literary work, especially novel, is "a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants that are specific to a class, social group, and speech community" (Abrams, 1999: 62). Allen (2000) notes that in Bakhtin's view "language embodies an ongoing dialogic clash of ideologies, worldviews, opinions, and interpretations" (p. 28). This ability of language to include within itself plurality of voices is, as Bakhtin called, heteroglossia. Heteroglossia, or many-voicedness, is best exemplified in polyphonic novels. In polyphonic novel, the dialogic heteroglot aspect of language is highlighted. "For Bakhtin, language for the individual consciousness lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's" (cited in Allen, 2000: 28). The word becomes one's own through an act of 'appropriation', which means that it is never wholly one's own, is always already permeated with traces of other words, other uses. This vision of language is what Kristeva highlights in her new term, intertextuality" (ibid, 28). These Bakhtinian ideas on language help Kristeva to articulate theory of intertextuality which is the most important technique in postmodern art.

Also, Bakhtin's ideas fit well within the postmodern area which celebrates plurality and differences. As Hoffman (2005) put it "[Postmodern] fiction furthermore "follows" Mikhael Bakhtin in breaking up the unquestioned organism of art, in refuting the understanding of texts as organic unities, as integrated structures in which all loose ends are finally gathered into aesthetic wholeness."(p. 29)

The Name of the Rose which first appeared in 1983 is Eco's most popular work since then. Its success was both commercial and critical since it was a theoretical novel structured in a detective story which was a popular genre. Eco, a theoretician both in semiotics and postmodernism, uses semiotic theory in his novel to exemplify postmodern theories on fiction in practice. The title of the novel, *The Name of the Rose*, which is taken from the last sentence of it illustrates the postmodern desire for uncertainty based on multiple meanings as Eco himself says in *The Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1984) "because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left" (p. 7). The title explains briefly the semiotic theme of the novel which by destroying the ultimate signifier, Aristotle's Book on Comedy, reveals another aspect of postmodernism's uncertainty towards any chance of access to truth. Postmodernist fiction inspired by disenchanting voice of philosophers such as Derrida and Lyotard, undermines the existence of truth through undermining language as means of searching the knowledge. William's towards the relations of signs reminds of Lyotard's skepticism towards the "grand narratives". In such a context in which the claim of truth as the only voice to be heard is deconstructed the notion of heteroglossia with multiple voices which led to multiple planes of meaning would be celebrated. Accordingly, Bakhtin's theory of the crowding of every apparently singular voice by a multiplicity of competing or qualifying voices quickly spread from literary studies into film, art history, philosophy and politics. Polyphonic plentitude, the searching out and affirmation of the plurality of different voices became the leading and defining principle of postmodernism's cultural politics.

According to Linda Hutcheon, "much of the debate over the definition of the term "postmodernism" has revolved around what some see as a loss of faith in this centralizing and totalizing impulse of humanist thought (Lyotard, 1984a). Offered as alternatives to system-building are theories which privilege the dialogized or hybrid (Bakhtin 1968; 1981)"

that welcomed multiplicity. “Fictionality refers to the condition of being fictional, that is to say, the condition of being constructed, narrated, and mediated. Fiction is always all of these things, which means that the represented world is always framed, presented to us from the perspective of another. In particular, fictionality involves a concern with the relationship between the language and represented world of fiction with the real world outside.” This reference to the fictionality draws attentions of the readers to their own process of interpreting the text. Metafictionality in postmodern fiction requires bringing the intertextual voices into play.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The last thirty years recover a celebration of plurality and multi-voicedness. From Aristotle to Structuralists the importance of an underlying system was undeniable. Russian Formalists and French Structuralists applied the theories of Saussure, whose basic ideas emphasize the existence of langue as an implicit linguistic system, to literature and even other activities related to human beings such as any cultural phenomena including “mythology, kinship relations, and modes of preparing food” (Abrams, 1999: 300) in order to construct a poetics for them. In contrast to structuralism, Poststructuralism comes into being in the 1970s which started with Jacques Derrida’s article (1970) “*Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences*”. Rejecting structuralists’ notion of preexistent system, Derrida introduces a kind of antifoundationalism in which there is no centre to organize and control structure. This antifoundationalism together with skepticism towards any conventional concept such as truth, meaning, knowledge, would become the basis of plurality of western culture.

Literature, as the mirror of the world, got involved in the philosophical theories which led to uncertainty towards every foundation ever existed. “Postmodernism suggests after all that totalized historical veracity is a myth and that foregrounding the processes of historical

representation as discourse and establishing the plurality of truths is a more effective way of conceptualizing a fragmentary past” (Owen Lea, 1996: 227). Postmodern fiction, influenced by the dominant milieu, stresses issues such as discontinuity, indeterminacy, pluralism, and ambiguity in order to respond to the needs of the postmodern man. While modern philosophy is based on the fact that signifier always refers to one signified in which reality situated and meaning is stable, postmodernism believes there is no stable meaning since there are only signifiers and not a fixed signified. Hence, the concept of text as independent entity and as having independent and stable meaning replaced by text as intertextual and having multiple meanings coexistent. In literary realm, according to Sarup (1993), “the fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Works such as these bring together heterogeneous images and technologies not only undermine many modernist assumptions but also raise questions about originality and authenticity” (p. 173).

To understand how Eco uses polyphony in his exploration of truth in *The Name of the Rose*, this thesis approaches to the work from a dialogic point of view as defined by Bakhtin. In such a milieu, Polyphony bestows a wide range of possibilities to postmodern fiction to challenge ideas of different form of ‘grand narratives’ through bringing together multiple voices and viewpoints which participate in a dynamic dialogue in the polyphonic structure of the novel. *The Name of the Rose*, as an example of such postmodern novel, through plurality of meanings, and the plurality of texts proves that “the whole process of signification, communication, and interpretation is an “interdisciplinary dissemination” (Eco, 1979) of linguistic and cultural codes and of encyclopedic competence, of both writers and readers” (Capozzi; 1989: 412). Eco uses polyphony as a narrative strategy by which the impossibility of access to truth based on logical reasoning is explored.

Eco through using 'historiographic metafiction' as one of the multiple frameworks of his story creates a dialogue between literature and history that is characteristic of postmodern fiction. This kind of dialogue "has been made possible by Julia Kristeva's early reworking of the Bakhtinian notions of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia- the multiple voicing of a text. Out of these ideas, she developed a more strictly formalist theory of the irreducible plurality of texts within and behind any given" (Hutcheon, 1989: 4). Another framework which Eco uses is detective story whose postmodern version reflects plurality, uncertainty and lack of order.

1.3. Significance of the Study

In postmodernism, semiology has been granted special importance since some philosophers such as Baudrillard uses it to criticize the postmodern culture. He "argues that when speech and writing were created, signs were invented to point to material or social reality, but the bond between signifier and signified became eroded. As advertising, propaganda and commodification set in, the sign began to hide 'basic reality'. In the postmodern age of 'hyper-reality' in which what are only illusions in the media of communication seem very real, signs hide the absence of reality and only pretend to mean something" (cited in Chandler, 2007: 81). In such a culture, Umberto Eco, a semiotician and philosopher, wrote more than forty scientific books and one hundred articles in different areas such as medievalism, semiotics, literary criticism, and postmodernism. He is both a theoretician in semiotics and postmodern novel and a novelist and this fact make him an important choice for this thesis as Michael P. Carroll notes "The fact of the matter is that there is probably not one academic in 10000 who has the ability to convert scholarly expertise into a good novel. Umberto Eco, author of *The Name of the Rose* however, is that one in 10000" (cited in "Antropologist" 432). Eco's significance for this study lies in the fact that he embodies multiplying representation of reality within the postmodern culture in a novel which even its title speaks out this plurality; the name of the rose is the signifier, but multiplicity of signifieds eroded any bondage between them as Baudrillard mentioned.

Eco shows that the multiplicity which has occurred in postmodern culture already has taken place in language and Bakhtin was the originator of the concept of innate multiplicity of language. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism has some affinity with deconstruction. Derrida's theory of free play or dissemination is a closer examination of intertextuality that dialogism emphasizes. But, according to Wheelock (2008), while "Derrida both depends on and rejects Saussure's linguistic principles of signifier and signified" (p. 17) Bakhtin rejects Saussurian linguistics and he emphasizes on the author and context which distinguishes him from the deconstructionist notions.

According to Bakhtin, individuals in specific social context create language whose meaning is determinable just in their specific social contexts. That is, for Bakhtin every utterance in a dialogue has its own historical and social meaning and so has not a stable meaning. Unlike Saussure who defined a lexical and finalized state for the word, Bakhtin regarded both language and the way of its interpretation in action, as an answerable act. In fact, he believes in a dialogic nature for language.

The above sketch suggests some of the motivations behind the current study to make a connection between Bakhtin's ideas and postmodern fiction's response to the contemporary pluralism. From theoretical point of view, both Bakhtin and Eco have made a tremendous influence on contemporary fiction to free itself from the bondages created by monologism of realistic novels before Dostoevsky. It is hoped that the present study contribute to scholarly discussions of Bakhtinian ideas and postmodern fiction.

1.4. Research Questions

This study endeavors to answer following questions in analyzing *The Name of the Rose* from a dialogic point of view:

1. How does the postmodernist fiction welcome Bakhtin's polyphony?

2. How does the narrative structure of *The Name of the Rose* reflect Bakhtinian's notions of heteroglossia and unfinalizability?

3. How does *The Name of the Rose* embody Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and polyphony?

1.5. Objectives of the study

The answers to the mentioned questions in this study, are supposed to prove that first *The Name of the Rose* is a polyphonic heteroglot novel in which unfinalizable heroes act as self-conscious characters capable of making choices. It also tries to trace carnivalistic features of the novel to prove both it uses Bakhtin's theory and it is a postmodern fiction which according to McHale (1987) incorporates "carnival, or some surrogate for carnival, at the level of its projected world. In the absence of real carnival context, it constructs fictional carnivals" (p. 174). Then it uses polyphony as a narrative device to reflect the plurality of worlds which is characteristic of postmodern fiction.

1.6. Approach and Methodology

The publication of Bakhtin's works in the western world has granted a wide prospect to the various domains of the human sciences. Bakhtin was the originator of a new approach in literary criticism which is called dialogic; it "refers to the inherent "addressivity" of all language; that is, all language is addressed to someone, never uttered without consciousness of a relationship between the speaker and the addressee." (L. Guerin, Labor, Morgan, C. Reesman, & Willingham, 2005: 362). "To Bakhtin a literary work is not (...) a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants that are specific to a class, social group, and speech community." (Abrams, 1999: 63) In this approach, "Bakhtin's principle of the novel include the freedom of the hero, special placement of the idea in the polyphonic design, and the principle of linkage that shape the novel into a whole- including multiple voices, ambiguity, multiple genres, stylization, parody," (L. Guerin et al, 2005: 366) and so on.

This study investigates *The Name of the Rose* from dialogic approach of Bakhtin. Since the approach requires a close analysis of different voices which participate in the dialogue, the study after structuring the theoretical framework goes to the cultural milieu of postmodernism that paves the way for bringing the plurality of voices into dialogic interaction. As Morace (1989) notes “there should be a close relationship between dialogism and postmodernism [...] there is the fact that the dialogic novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres), [in order to deconstruct] the conventionality of their forms and their language and to insert indeterminacy and semantic openness” (p. 28). Then it illustrates how Eco through creating a carnivalized context full of voices disrupts the authority of his single voice. By structuring a formal heteroglossia, he embodies the ideological polyphony of postmodern world.

1.6.1. Definition of Key Terms

Dialogism: Dialogism has associated with the name of Bakhtin. Frank Farmer (1998) believes that “dialogism is an inherent quality of language” (4). He, also, notes that it is a label given to a framework based on which different narrative voices interact with each other and participate in the dialogue which occurs between competing, conflicting, contrary, or contradictory languages - one which informs the dominant ideology, and the other, which informs the subversive.” (56) It represents the process through which meaning is created by the interactions among the author, the work and the reader/listener. It means that dialogism alludes to the existence of multiple point of view within a single text in which these viewpoint never merged.

Heteroglossia: refers to the coexistence of different stratifications within a single national language. It also describes the simultaneous use of various sorts of signs and the tension among them, based on sociohistorical forces, within the language of the novel according to Bakhtin who introduces the term in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Graham Roberts defines it as “the conflict between “centripetal” and “centrifugal”, “official” and “unofficial” discourses within the same national language” (cited in Allen, 2000: 213).

Unfinalizability: Qian Zhongwen (1997, "Literary History") believes that According to Bakhtin's unfinalizability, life is an ongoing process of utterances, or an ever-lasting 'dialogue' which is a key concept in Bakhtinian thought. Since polyphonic novel illustrates society as it is, it must include characters which are unfinalizable. That is, they must be self-conscious, autonomous, and independent of the author.

Carnivalsque: According to Abrams (1999) polyphony "parallels the flouting of authority and inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted in a season of carnival. It does so by introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinary regarded as sacrosanct" (p. 63).

Polyphonic novel: Polyphonic novel is one in which plurality of different voices exist with no dominancy between them. These voices are put into dialogic interactions to reveal the coexistence of contradictory elements within the whole structure of the novel. "It demonstrates and celebrates the dialogic nature of society by presenting a vision of human society dominated by dialogue and play between voices and utterances" (Allen, 2000: 217).

Postmodernism: According to Hutcheon (1989) "postmodernism manifest itself in many fields of cultural endeavor- architecture, literature, photography, film, paintings, video, dance, music, and elsewhere. In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one" (p. 1).

1.7. Limitations of the Study

Non-accessibility of some of the important theoretical books on Bakhtin and postmodernism and some essays that pose polyphonic issues in postmodern fiction was the

most important limitation to this study. Hence we had to use internet and the book reviews which were there to comprehend the matter.

Another important limitation was related to time. Since the thesis involved two wide subjects in the realm of criticism, one Bakhtinian domain and the other postmodernism, it just selected one work by Eco which deprive the thesis of a comparative study between two postmodern novels of two different authors that could lead to a better understanding of polyphonic nature of postmodern novels.

1.8. Literature Review

This study deals with both Bakhtin and postmodernism and the notion of plurality common between them. The concept of plurality in Bakhtin's vocabulary is polyphony. So, this thesis first studies this concept fully with regard to Bakhtin and Bakhtinian scholars. Then it goes to postmodernism and illustrates the ideas of different theoreticians and philosophers which led to pluralism.

Bakhtin's works which can be considered as landmark in literary criticism are *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *The Dialogic Imagination*, and *Rabelias and His World*. The notion of polyphony first appears in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in which Bakhtin hailed Dostoevsky as the father of polyphonic novel. He considers the concept of polyphony, unfinalizability and carnival regarding to Dostoevsky's heroes; he believes that unfinalizability is a characteristic of human being in general which refers to the fact that individual people cannot be finalized, understood, or known. Polyphonic novel should create unfinalizable characters if they want to reflect human beings as they are and represent a true polyphony of voices. Here, he defines polyphony as "a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work" (p. 34). The *Rabelais and His World* illustrates the origin of carnivalized literature which he had described in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In this

work, he explores Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel as an example of a carnivalized literature and Carnavalesque as a social system in Middle Ages in which hierarchies had been inverted and every taboo had been permitted. He devoted a chapter to laughter to mentions it as a liberating force and "as a sign, a part of a puzzle, a phenomena of the mind" (Sælid Gilhus, 1997: 115). The notion of heteroglossia is regarded in *The Dialogic Imagination*; it is a collection of four essays concerning the novel and language. Through these essays Bakhtin explains the notions of heteroglossia, dialogism and chronotop. Heteroglossia alludes to the stratification of a single language into many branches such as jargons, dialects, and so on.

In order to have a better understanding of Bakhtin's ideas, this thesis makes use of many other scholarly books. Michael Holquist recent books have been influential in bringing Bakhtinian notions to a wider audience. Together with Clark Katrina wrote *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1986) in which the biography of Bakhtin is represented and a highly view of him and his significance in all the human sciences has been formulated. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986) is another important book which he edited with Caryl Emerson. The book includes six essays which are Bakhtin's essays on the problem of method and nature of culture. Its most important essay is *The problem of Speech Genre* in which Bakhtin focuses on the differences between everyday language and literary language; the differences between Linguistics of Saussure and Bakhtin's dialogic view of language is illustrated here. Bakhtin criticizes the study of genre which did not consider the extra literary genres and they just limited themselves to the realm of literature and rhetoric. Holquist's *Dialogism* (2002) examines Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue with other scholars in the realm such as Saussure, Fried, Marx, and Lukacs. It also includes dialogic readings of some literary work such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and others. He mentions that both Bakhtin and Saussure "begin with the revolutionary assumption that language should be looked at from the point of view of the individual speaker" (p. 43). Craig Brandist *The Bakhtin Circle* (2002) considers the