

Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Cabuliwallah': A Dialogic Interpretation

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Abstract: *The present article endeavours to read a classic Tagore short story 'The Cabuliwallah' in the light of Bakhtinian dialogic criticism. In Mikhail Bakhtin's critical pronouncements 'dialogue' informs any cultural-linguistic communication or interaction. Difference is the prerequisite for a 'dialogue'. Differences are negotiated or addressed in the act of 'dialogue'. The philosophic core of 'dialogism' is essentially concerned with the theory of communication and meaning production in cultural domain. Though envisioned originally as a revolutionary alternative aesthetics by Bakhtin himself, it has been doing rounds across disciplines as an expedient, yet fashionable explanatory framework for addressing the political import of any socio-cultural phenomenon, ever since it got currency in the west in the 1980s. Notwithstanding its specific literary-historical as well as political context in its provenance, dialogic perspective is being applied to other literary forms alongside novel, cutting across the traditional historical and geographical boundaries with varying degrees of critical satisfaction. Tagore's 'The Cabuliwallah', within a limited compass of its narrative space and time, produces a rich dialogic interaction of culturally stratified and politically inscribed voices and its multi-accidental discourses demonstrate the text's amenability to the application of other attendant Bakhtinian concepts like 'polyphony', 'heteroglossia' and 'the carnivalesque'.*

Key Words: *dialogic, narrative, polyphony, discourse, heteroglossia, carnivalesque*

The activities and curious prattles of a five-year-old girl Mini, the heroine of this story, brings into sharp focus the multi-dimensional interactions of the discourses of the adult's and the child's world with dramatic intensity, thus liberating it from a cosy assumption of a culturally and politically innocent children's bed time story. The narrative journey, though brief, is tortuous enough, to propel the discourses of the narrator, Mini, Mini's mother and Rahaman, the Cabuliwallah, to enter a dialogic field. These voices, in the course of the linear progression of time and in consonance with the slice of life that is represented in this story, are few in number, but stratified culturally as well as psychologically. Thus voices are diverse and maintain their relative autonomy to satisfy the requirement of the pre-existence of differences for the operation of 'dialogue' in a social space. As Clark and Holquist points out in their seminal introduction to the life and thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, 'dialogue', the fundamental concept of Bakhtin's poetics builds upon the model of our everyday conversational dialogue. Bakhtin himself clarifies further:

Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances; a dialogic approach is possible toward any signifying part of an utterance, even toward an individual word, if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position.

(*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p-3)

One of the most fascinating of Bakhtin's tropes for the operation of 'dialogism' is that of a bridge. This bridge connects not only the speaker and his or her interlocutor, but also individual words in a speech-act and forms a 'shared territory'. To elaborate a bit in the literary critical context, we may discover dialogue between characters, between a character and the narrator, and also within a single character's speech. Lynne Pearce, an eminent Bakhtin scholar observes in his essay "Bakhtin and the dialogic principle":

At its most profound, Bakhtin's dialogic principle thus teaches us that all words, all sentences, are oriented toward someone else's speech, regardless of whether that 'other' is present in the text or not. As he observes in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1984), all words, both in 'living conversation' and in written texts are 'oriented' towards a response of some kind.

Bakhtin's wide variety of speech types are further deftly summarized by David Lodge into three broad categories: (1) the direct speech of the author; (2) the represented speech of the characters; and (3) doubly oriented or doubly voiced speech. Bakhtin pointed out the sub-categories of 'double-voiced' discourse and the most potential and frequently operative ones of them are: (1) stylization; (2) skaz; (3) parody; and (4) 'hidden polemic'. Exemplifying substantially from Dostoevsky's notes from the Underground Bakhtin refers the term 'hidden polemic' to those words and utterances that Lynne Pearce points out 'are actively, and often aggressively, in dialogue with other words or utterances not present in the text and which they try to defend themselves against'.

The discourses of Mini, Mini's mother, Mini's father and the Cabuliwallah assume composite meaning as they participate in dialogue. The narrator uses direct speeches, the represented speeches of other characters and also 'double voiced' discourse. The narrator borrows the discourses of Mini, Mini's mother and also of the Cabuliwallah, trying to represent them in their original flavor. Sometimes he exploits 'hidden polemic' and parodies, quite subtly, others' discourses. The characters throw up facets of their personalities as their discourses overlap and interlap, depending upon the momentum of situations. Mini's voice is that of a fidgety, frolicking girl child. Her unceasing haphazard thoughts prompted by the confusing responses of the adult world ooze out through almost telegraphic sentences. When the narrator was busy in the midst of the seventeenth chapter of his new novel, Mini stole into the room with a sudden disconcerting question- 'Father! Ramdayal, the door-keeper, calls a crow a Krow! He doesn't know anything, does he?' In her voice we can trace the echo of the elite adult discourse that takes it for granted that servants are lacking in standard semantic and syntactic competence. She too almost unaware assumes an adult's judgmental position. Mini's exclamation shows the urgency and the pressure of curiosity that admit of no preamble. It sounds like a monologue where the addressee is physically present, but his response is not genuinely solicited. This is a kind of thinking aloud. Without losing much time in expectation of her father's reply, Mini hurls her next volley- 'What do you think, father? Bhola says there is an elephant in the clouds, blowing water out of his trunk and that is why it rains!'. Such expressions have also the potential for problematizing the genuineness of a child's voice, because such stretch of imaginative flight is guided by the adult's narrative. Still Mini is applying her reasoning to test the veracity of such a narrative, though she requires the sanction of an adult. Interesting enough, the adult voice is purposely silent. It evokes the reader's conjecture- does the narrator want to keep the illusion, considering it to be congenial for a child's mental wellbeing? or is he really unable to undertake the trouble of building an alternative schema? To refer to Mini's preparation for the next question, the narrator deliberately uses the expression 'darting off anew', thus highlighting the metaphor of an assault on the adult world, and obviously, the adult world is helplessly unprepared. Mini quizzes the narrator- 'Father! What relation is mother to you?'. It marks the complete discomfiture of an adult person. Now the narrator extemporizes- 'Go and play with Bhola, Mini! I am busy!' This adult discourse now bears the accent of threat, and exudes the position of power, to tactfully evade and effectively silence the child's voice. The child, however, remains unfazed. She plays softly near the narrator's table, drumming on her knees. It reveals the child's capacity for maintaining relative autonomy vis-à-vis a vigilant and aggressive adult ideology that fosters norms, etiquette, reason and conformity to tradition. Seeing a cabuliwallah Mini runs to the window crying 'A cabuliwallah! A cabuliwallah!' The narrator's comments on the cabuliwallah's appearance underscores his long cherished national and cultural superiority over, and almost instinctive disgust at, and reflexive distrust of a mountain bred Cabuliwallah. The adult gentleman's discourse fails, this time, to divine Mini's true feelings.

The Cabuliwallah's arrival on the scene initiates the process of complication in the plot. The narrator fears him because his 'seventeenth chapter will never be finished!'. Thus the narrator's systematic and coded world of fiction senses a threat in the cabuliwallah. Initially Mini is overcome with fear in cabuliwallah's presence and runs to her mother for protection. Is she unconsciously craving for homosociality? We can not miss the irony that Mini seeks to protect her child's world through her mother's support, whereas her mother's voice performs a ventriloquist's trick in echoing the patriarchal ideology that also harbours a deep rooted suspicion for a male foreigner. Mini's father, in the capacity of an literary artist thrills at the precarious situation his hero and heroine are now in. This foreshadows the crisis in which he will find himself locked in temporarily, in connection with the incidental intimacy between the hero of this story, i.e the cabuliwallah, and the heroine, i.e Mini. Reality and fiction enter a dialogue here. In a bid to get rid of an unwelcome cabuliwallah, the narrator resorts to making small purchase. Even he starts talking about sundry topics- 'Abdur Rahaman, the Russians, the English, and the frontier policy'. This gesture betrays a gentlemanly veneer. However the cabuliwallah persists on seeing Mini and thus categorically reveals his purpose of dropping by. At the narrator's command Mini arrives and looks at the cabuliwallah inquisitively. The cabuliwallah offers her nuts and raisins, but 'she would not be tempted'. This gesture of cabuliwallah is charged with dual significance. Cabuliwallah is a businessman by profession and he represents an economy that was fast fading at the turn of the twentieth century. He had limited access to the elite households. So it may be that he bribes Mini to rope in a prospective customer. But Mini sees through such strategy and openly exhibits her disinterest. It may also be a gesture of inviting intimacy. The next development is registered in the following manner:

A few mornings later, however, as I was leaving the house, I was startled to find Mini, seated on a bench near the door, laughing and talking, with the great cabuliwallah at her feet. In all her life, it appeared, my small daughter had never found so patient a listener, save her father. And already the corner of her little sari was stuffed with almonds and raisins, the gift of her visitor.

(*Collected Stories*, p-7)

Mini has found in the cabuliwallah an aged equal, who values her thoughts and plans. There is something of a child in him. His companionship with Mini proves to be stronger than that with his father. Mini's father turns out to be the cabuliwallah's competitor in this regard. The cabuliwallah's antique heroics- 'I will thrash my father-in-law!'

symbolizes his earnest desire to protect her childhood even if it requires a violent confrontation. Mini too relishes the misery of the poor discomfited relative'. Now the voices of Mini and the cabuliwallah form a joint platform to guard against the cultural inroads of adulthood. The word 'father-in-law' is multi-layered in significance. First, it suggests patriarchy in which a girl is subjected to numerous laws and her childhood is permanently lost. Secondly, it implies police. We can strike a balance between these two pointers of meaning. A bold hint is that father's world does the police over the child's world in a way that despite the sporadic spilling out of the voice of a child, it is persistently gagged and marginalized. Mini's mother, who in the eyes of Mini's father is 'an unfortunately very timid woman' scaffolds the voice of adulthood in her suspicion of cabuliwallah's motive behind such an unusual intimacy between Mini and Cabuliwallah. Mini's mother apprehends that the cabuliwallah has potential to snatch away Mini's childhood from their hands and preserve it in a different way. In that case her attempts to initiate Mini, almost unaware, into the system of adulthood, to perpetuate prevalent power structure would fail.

The narrator, though himself an adult person, and an exponent of the values of social reality, resists the attempts of Mini's mother to banish the cabuliwallah. He applies his persuasive power to mitigate the stubborn fear and prejudiced suspicion of Mini's mother. By this time he himself has caught a fancy to the cabuliwallah, for his association with a distant unknown land enkindles his artistic visionary faculty. He allows the companionship between Mini and the cabuliwallah, though a certain degree of ambivalence always prevails. The situation has been captured thus:

Even to me it is a little startling now and then, suddenly to surprise this tall, loose-garmented man laden with his bags in the corner of a dark room; but when Mini ran smiling, with her 'O cabuliwallah! O cabuliwallah!' and the two friends, so far apart in age subsided into their old laughter and their old jokes I felt reassured.

(Collected Stories,p-12)

At this point the Bakhtinian concept of 'the carnivalesque' makes its presence loudly felt. This term had its origin in his literary historical research on medieval festivals in his book on Rabelais. The subversive potential of the carnival is noted thus:

The suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident in official feasts....it was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival [...]

This temporary suspension, both real and ideal, of hierarchical rank, created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special kinds of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came into contact with each other and liberating them from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.

(*Rabelais and His World*,p-10)

In the face of an all-alert and aggressive system of adulthood, the flippant discourses of children go on with a subtle mocking intent, though at the connivance of the norms of society. The implication is that if allowed judiciously, children's discourse will tire out in due course. It also hopes that at least children would take a casual, lenient view of the adult world. The codes of reality are quite confident that they can indoctrinate children into the normalcy of adulthood sooner or later. In the meantime society allows children purposefully to remain engaged in a world of wish fulfillment, fancy and virtual reality. But cabuliwallah's voice has already affected that of the narrator in a way that the former rings as an undertone in the latter. Cabuliwallah evokes for the narrator a whole range of associations of foreign places and people. Fancy, an important element of children's discourse keeps sway over the adult discursive practices.

Now the plot takes a hasty u-turn in favour of the voice of society. It has waited long, but it pounces upon the children's world with vengeance, without any further delay. The cabuliwallah, a businessman in appearance, but a grown-up child in essence, is arrested on the charge of taking murderous attempts against one of his customers. Cabuliwallah is tactless and impulsive like a child. Therefore he takes rash, violent action against the cheat, without caring a bit about its long-term impact on his business goodwill. Thus cabuliwallah falls into the trap of the society. The narrator too shifts his attention from him on superficial moral-legal ground. The cabuliwallah is sentenced to several years' imprisonment. In his absence society tightens its grip over Mini. She has now learnt that she should play only with girls. New companions have filled her life. Even the narrator, cabuliwallah's rival in terms of affectionate intimacy with Mini, gets rarely any opportunity of speaking with her. The breach with childhood is complete. Mini has forgotten cabuliwallah. Mini's father makes arrangements for Mini's marriage. It takes place during the Puja holidays. Patriarchy makes it look like a festival, whereas, in actuality, Mini is being sent into imprisonment to the father-in-laws. To the narrator's surprise cabuliwallah returns and claims to see her. The narrator intuitively realizes- 'I felt that the day would have been better-omened had he not appeared'. Cabuliwallah's voice admits of no change in terms of time. He has brought with him a few things as gifts for Mini, as he used to do during their earlier meetings. The narrator is determined to maintain emotional distance. So he attempts to pay off the cabuliwallah. But the cabuliwallah blurts out with a tremendous pressure of emotion:

You are very kind , Sir! Keep me in memory. Do not offer me money! You have a little girl: I too have one like her in my own home. I think of her, and bring this fruit to your child- not to make a profit for myself.

(*Collected Stories*, p-17)

The father in the cabuliwallah takes over his professional identity. He has pulled the narrator , his cultural superior , down to the same pedestal as a father.As the cabuliwallah stays away from his daughter, the chance of his being under the grip of the codes of his native society is less here. He does not require to negotiate the norms of society in order to protect the childhood of his daughter at home. He has got in Mini a substitute for his own daughter, and therefore, it is easier for him to take up desperate means to uphold the child' voice. When at the command of Mini's father , Mini appears before him adorned as a young bride, the cabuliwallah heaves out, though, for the last time, the old familiar joking question with a slight modification-‘ Little one, are you going to your father-in-law's house?’. Now cabuliwallah has embarrassed Mini. He sees not mini, but her apparition. He is nonplussed at this development, which he has failed to stay. Here we see a broken cabuliwallah who is at pains to come to terms with his disillusionment. The narrator, now reawakened to his new identity in relation to an inconsequential, legally stigmatized Cabuliwallah, offers a currency note to him with the suggestion-‘ Go back to your daughter, Rahaman, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child’. It will not to be too absurd ,if we interpret this gesture as a token of penitential compensation ,on his part, because he realizes that he is in collusion with the ideological forces maintained surreptitiously by patriarchy. He can not help pushing his daughter into marriage while she is still in her late childhood.

Hence in the polyphonic ambience of the story the voices maintain social and cultural diversity. Each and every character produces multi-accented voice. These voices sometimes synchronize and sometimes produce jarring notes. The narrator modulates his voice as a father, a literary artist, a rival to the cabuliwallah and last of all, as a chastened gentleman who sheds his snobbery and moral uprightness to become a universal father. Mini's mother plays on different keys-as an anxious parent and also as a middle class woman bearing the burden of patriarchal tradition. Cabuliwallah too practices tonal shifts to connect different social positions- a stranger, Mini's companion, an exponent of a small , slowly fading economy, a father, and a rebel. Within the narrative space the male voice, the female voice, the child's voice, the adult's voice, the voice of fact , the voice of fancy, the voice of the marginalized and the voice of the privileged address one another. Though the voice of adulthood snatches victory, the voice of childhood gives sufficient fight. None of the voices or discursive practices in the story exhibit a sacrosanct and ultimate social value. True to the spirit of dialogism, addressivity and differences inform the characters' ideological positions. Diverse modalities of their participation put up a dynamism in the operation of power. Mini, Mini's father and cabuliwallah enjoy relativity of power and position and flout the norms of society, though for a short spell. Not a single thematic element of this story is constructed from the point of view of a non-participating 'third person'. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin asserts-‘ when dialogue ends everything ends’. Tagore's 'The Cabuliwallah' does not end, it just stops.

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