



Khawto: The Wound through the Bakhtinian Lens

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Khawto (2016), directed by Kamaleshwar Mukherjee, not only touches multiple chords with the contemplative cine-going audience but also facilitates discussions regarding diverse issues of literature and literary theory. A film classified as a work of drama and psychological thriller, thus, becomes an apt text for discussions about Dialogisms. It opens with young lovers Sohag (Tridha Choudhury) and Rishabh (Ronodeep Bose) embarking on a romantic getaway. During a solitary walk on the dark beach of Koelphuli, Sohag meets Nirbed Lahiri (Prosenjit Chattopadhyay), a once-renowned Bengali author living in self-imposed exile. The author invites the couple to his bungalow, and begins to narrate his life-story. The narrative shifts between millennial Kolkata and present-day Koelphuli as Nirbed Lahiri reminisces the heyday of his career as assistant editor of the literary magazine *Drishtikone* (Point of view). Nirbed claims to have fallen in love for the first time in his life on the thirty-second birthday of his wife Sreejita (Raima Sen). Among the guests invited that evening was Sreejita's batchmate, Alakesh (Rahul Banerjee) and his wife Antara (Paoli Dam). Nirbed is fascinated by Antara and is determined to woo her at any cost. The clandestine affair reaches its peak on a trip to Palamu, but is followed by a spiralling descent into death, disillusionment and alienation. Alakesh commits suicide, Antara loses her sanity and Sreejita divorces Nirbed due to the latter's disloyalty. It is possible to attempt a substantive analysis of *Khawto* with respect to the theories of dialogism, heteroglossia and carnivalesque professed by the 20th century Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

The film unfolds like the narrative of the eponymous autobiographical novel, *Khawto*, and it accommodates multiple disjunctive agencies within itself. Nirbed muses, "When several bits of clouds gather in the sky, we call it 'monsoon', and a gathering of several bits of words – 'novel'." This statement attempts at dismantling the monologic trend of regarding the novel as a monolithic medium for expressing a singular idea of the author, and throws light upon its fragmented matrix. For Bakhtin, dialogism functions in a text as a principle of radical otherness. Far from aspiring to the telos of a synthesis or a resolution, the function of dialogism is to sustain and think through the radical exteriority or heterogeneity of one voice with regard to any other, including that of the novelist himself. She or he is not, in this regard, in any privileged situation with respect to his characters (Man 102). *Khawto* constantly brings out this exteriority of voice, most importantly, that of the narrator, by means of close-up shots of a younger Nirbed (gazing into space) through a vivid red filter, and the flashback technique. Nirbed is a mere scriptor who allows his characters the freedom necessary to develop on their own. He himself is a character in his autobiography, and the film shows his subservience to time, space and event. Nirbed observes that had he succeeded in creating distance between himself and Antara on their return from Palamu, his novel would have had a 'watery'



climax. But Antara's insistence on meeting Nirbed in private creates the final catastrophe which ironically suits his reputation as a dark and decadent romantic. By the time he yields up the manuscript of his autobiography to Sohag, he has already relinquished his author(ity), and allowed the natural flow of events to govern the trajectory of the plot.

Mukherjee's explorations of the question of autonomy of fictional characters is summed up succinctly in his later film *Mukhomukhi* (2019), which is also about an author, Isha Chatterjee, played by Gargee Roy Chowdhury. While she composes a novel about a dysfunctional couple, her friend and critic Agnibha (Rajatabha Dutta) suggests some changes in the plot which transform the very nature of the characters, so much so that they are unfamiliar even to their creator. When a dismayed Agnibha asks Isha, "Are these the characters that you created?", Isha replies, "I didn't; Time did." In order to create something purely original, the author must relinquish their control of the characters.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles writes:

A planned world is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. (Fowles 96)

This Bakhtinian concept, common to literary discourse, is introduced effectively into Mukherjee's cinematic narrative in both the films. Far from being an omniscient author-creator, Nirbed's penchant is oriented more along the lines of destructive "debauchery". He reflects, "Be it a tempest, a flood, *Aslesha*, a tornado or a hurricane, they can never be such a debauch as I am. I rule over creation and order. I am the apocalypse." Bakhtin believed that people are not closed units; they are open, loose, disordered, unfinalized: they are "extraterritorial" and "nonself-sufficient" (Morson and Emerson 52). Furthermore:

To be means to be for another, and through the other for oneself. A person has no sovereign internal territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another* (Bakhtin 287).

Nirbed seamlessly navigates the interstices between self and other and participates in a dynamic process of maturation through the internalisation of the other's voice. He is almost the criminally ostracised *poete maudit* when he talks of extracting "Antara's aroma to the last drop and making it into a perfume" – sex is like an adventure to him which allows him to question ethics and create characters with a dynamic quality: the character, for Bakhtin, is an event and not a static entity who can be filed into a predetermined category (Patterson 134). As Nirbed, the author becomes other to himself, he may now speak with Nirbed, the hero, and thus justify the Bakhtinian aesthetic experience as an encounter between discourses – between consciousnesses (Patterson 134).

In Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the novel, heteroglossia postulates distinct and antagonistic class structures as well as the celebratory crossing of social barriers (Man 102). "Heteroglossia" may be understood as the presence of diverse "points of view on the world, forms for conceptualising the world in words, specific world views, each characterised by its own objects, meanings and values" in a particular language (Bakhtin 291). Heteroglossia is employed in *Khawto* essentially through the



agency of one character – Alakesh, who is loquacious, extroverted and has a pronounced child-like aspect to his nature which while making him seem adorable to many, also introduces a monotone to his personality. While his wife, Antara claims to love him, she is also deeply dissatisfied with his considerably inferior intellect. “Are you aware of his (Alakesh’s) mental age?” Antara asks Nirbed. Antara is a woman of remarkable intellect and personal charm. Apart from having won a gold-medal at college, she had also attained significant fame through her publications in little magazines. She had a vibrant social life and was the apple of several eyes. She enjoys solving crossword puzzles from newspapers and claims to “win” the game every day. On the other hand, Alakesh is simple and hard-working without much concern for a contemplative life. The socio-cultural gap between husband and wife is brought out in the course of two memorable incidents when the use of homophones exemplifies heteroglossia; these two incidents are discussed in the following paragraph.

At Nirbed’s residence, the guests invited for Sreejita’s birthday marvel at Nirbed’s books and his collection of artefacts. First, as Sreejita and her friends recite a poem by Neruda, Alakesh refers to the Chilean poet as *Nyara-Da* (informal Bengali way of referring to an older, acquainted man called *Nyara* meaning one with a shaven head), much to the indignation of Antara. Secondly, when Alakesh expresses his dismay at some specimens of African tribal art on Nirbed’s walls, it is pointed out to him that these may be categorised as “Makonde” art. Alakesh replies nonchalantly that he cannot be bothered with “*Makundo* stuff”. *Makundo* is a derogatory Bengali term for a man who lacks facial hair. Alakesh brings about homophonic transformations of both “Neruda” and “Makonde”, and this leads not only to a confrontation of ideologies, but also a transgression of social barriers, laying bare the incipient conflict between class structures in the world, as well as in art. While members of the learned, somewhat elite, intellectual Bengali upper-middle class will appreciate the poetry of Pablo Neruda and African Makonde art, a stockbroker such as Alakesh, who has no inclination towards the arts and literature (nor has any need to do so) will assign blatant misnomers to the same in public. While the film terms Alakesh to be an “average” individual, and Antara calls him *bajarsarkar* (a man employed in medieval and Early Modern Bengal to buy goods from the market), Alakesh in turn mocks the erudition of Antara by saying, “How much you know! I feel like kissing you while eating”, thus rendering intellectualism as superfluous to the low-brow, materialistic existence.

Patterson is of the opinion that polyglossia frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and has a liberating impact on language, a major indicator of this liberation being laughter (Patterson 133). Alakesh achieves precisely this: not only does he afford comic-relief to the audience, but also intrigues them by bringing about the uncomfortable juxtaposition of two discourses. His words (*Nyara-Da* and *Makundo*) make repetitive allusions to hairlessness, which is, in itself, considered comic in Indian social and literary traditions. In “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel”, Bakhtin develops the rogue, the clown and the fool – those who are free to be ‘other’ in this world. (Bakhtin 159). Alakesh fits into the categories of both the clown and the fool. Bakhtin argues that these three figures influence the positioning of the author himself within the novel, and also the author’s point of view (Bakhtin 160). This is because:

...the novelist stands in need of some essential, formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life as well as the position from which he makes that



life public. And it is precisely here...that the masks of the clown and the fool come to the aid of the novelist (Bakhtin 161).

In *Khawto* one sees an on-screen representation of this profoundly philosophical observation, translated into cinematic screen-play.

Mukherjee's film refers to acclaimed Bengali cultural icons in a tongue in cheek manner which masks a genuine questioning of *bhadralok* pretensions. "All Bengalis are *Aranyak* ("of the wild/ lovers of the wild)" remarks Nirbed when Sreejita's friends plan the trip to Palamu. Not only does this statement allude to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's celebrated novel *Aranyak* (Of the Forest), but also facilitates the comparison of *Khawto* with Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Dinratri* (Days and Nights of the Forest). The four protagonists of *Aranyer Dinratri* were also headed to Palamu, but they halt en route at a forest bungalow which catches their fancy. There are clear parallels in the action and dialogue of the two films; first, Hari (Shamit Bhanja) in *Aranyer Dinratri* performs a bowling action which is mirrored by Alakesh in *Khawto*; secondly, both films refer to Tarzan, and thirdly, while *Aranyer Dinratri* depicts a memory game, the protagonists of *Khawto* reject it and settle for a mind game instead, which Bishakha had secretly intended as a trap for Nirbed.

Mukherjee follows Ray in employing the carnivalesque which operates through subversion of the established order through chaos and laughter. In Bakhtin's words, it brings out "the joyful relativity of all structure and order. Asim (Soumitra Chattopadhyay) in *Aranyer Dinratri* remarks that he enjoys breaking rules occasionally, since dwelling in civilised society creates ennui in the urban subject. The wilderness becomes an ideal space for the carnivalesque spirit to unfold in both Ray's and Mukherjee's films. The latter film, however, descends more obviously and melodramatically, into a dark abyss in contrast to the objective distancing of the directorial viewpoint in Ray's film. The older Nirbed reminisces how the sylvan charm of Palamu, alcohol, the scent of women and the aroma of burning meat had commingled to create the ideal setting for catastrophe. The spirit of the carnival thus collapses ethical restraint and makes for the unrestrained enjoyment of pleasures forbidden and controlled by society, which ultimately leads to the disintegration of two families through suicide, insanity, divorce and self-imposed exile. According to Bakhtin,

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. (Bakhtin 254).

Kamaleshwar Mukherjee's *Khawto* upholds this principle in myriad ways. Structured in the form of an autobiographical novel, *Khawto* is constructed not as a monolithic and monologic discourse, but as a combination of discourses and of the responses to those discourses (Patterson 131). Each worldview presented in the film is animated and vivified by responses to competing worldviews and this is achieved cinematically through a combination of intelligent screenplay and a remarkably nuanced understanding of the individual characters. Moreover, in spite of the preponderance of Nirbed's narratorial voice, it is constantly subjected to scrutiny and influences by other characters, thus enabling the film to function as a space for consummate dialogue.



All in all, *Khawto* is the fruit of substantial content and intelligent film-making which enriches and entertains at the same time while facilitating discussions regarding the accommodation of heterogeneous world-views in modern society. Being a partially bilingual film, *Khawto* incorporates the use of heteroglossia in order to facilitate the juxtaposition of social ideologies, and corroborates how class-boundaries will be inevitably rendered fluid through the “dialogic” imagination: Nirbed and Antara qualify as “intellectual” and “above average” while Alakesh stands on the other side of the divide, visibly insubstantial and materialistic. Finally, the iconic space of the forest serves as an active agent for questioning social dogma and illustrating the Bakhtinian notion of carnival.

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