

Dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony in Shyam Benegal's teledrama series *Amaravati ki Kathayen*

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Abstract

This study offers a critical analysis of Shyam Benegal's Hindi language-based teledrama series *Amaravati ki Kathayen* utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony. It is common sense to think that Bakhtin, the philosopher of dialogism, would be sympathetic to the drama form in which dialogues are the most natural mode of expression. Instead, Bakhtin argues that the monological selection of languages in drama does not allow the dialogic interaction of different registers. Second, drama, for upholding its unity of plot, cannot allow its characters to abide by a truly multi-level dialogic engagement. However, this act is especially performed in the novel by the inter-animation of the narrator's all-encompassing language and the language of the characters. Against this, this study brings to the fore the historical premises of Bakhtin's reservations against the dramatic form. Recognizing the merits of Bakhtin's philosophy of literature and language, two episodes from *Amaravati ki Kathayen*, a Hindi language-based teledrama series, are analyzed to place them before the global audiences as well as to ascertain the relevance of Bakhtin's poetics across the genres. Above all, a return to dialogism as a critical inquiry is important to promote the values of plurality, dialogue, and peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: *Amaravati ki Kathayen*, Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia

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Research problem and objective

International scholarship in the last three decades has paid increased attention to the study and interpretation of the literary and cultural merits of regional texts. This process has helped the global literary communities and audiences to identify and understand the treasury of wisdom and the fountain of beauty, sympathy, and passion locked in the regional cultural products. In sync with this trend, this study proposes a cultural analysis of *Amaravati ki Kathayen*, a Hindi language-based teledrama series directed by Shyam Benegal.

Amaravati ki Kathayen is adapted from *Amaravati Kathalu*, a collection of short stories authored by the Telugu story writer Sathyam Sankaramanchi (1937–1987). The stories take after the style of Anthon Chekhov, the famous Russian writer. They are heart-warming and they delineate the experiences that people encounter in their day-to-day lives. Sankaramanchi's esemplastic imagination reworks real life and culture to weave a whole new world around the tiny village of Amaravati and the river Krishna. Although the stories are works of imagination and fiction, they are influenced by the multiple incidents and folk stories on Amaravati. One of the best collections of 20th-century Telugu fiction, this book won the Andhra Sahitya Academy award in 1979 ("Telugu Short Story: The Spate," 2019).

Despite its rich wisdom of life and the classic art of story-telling, *Amaravati Kathalu* has not drawn any important scholarly attention. The anthology is still read and appreciated by a limited number of readers from the Telugu communities only. On the other hand, the televised version of this important work of art is available on YouTube, right before the global audience. What is missing is a precise critical inquiry that can familiarize this classic work of art with film-savvy audiences by interpreting its cultural and cinematic value. Against this backdrop, this study undertakes a critical analysis of two episodes from *Amaravati ki Kathayen* utilizing the theoretical and methodological insights from Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "dialogics," "heteroglossia," and "polyphony".

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), "dialogics" or dialogism means the process by which meaning evolves out of the interactions among the author, the work, and the reader. These elements are affected by the sociopolitical contexts in which they are located. Languages, genres, or ideas do not exist in themselves, but only in their relations to each other. The being is not autonomous but a co-being in simultaneous co-existence. Therefore, Bakhtin pleads for locating the author in the spatial and temporal context, and the deployed speech genres.

Bakhtin is a critic of the monological view of the novel form that lays too much importance on the author's originality. His concept of "heteroglossia" describes the coexistence of multiple voices, points of view, styles, and discourses in a work of art. The author's originality, he argues, lies in the combination of these elements. For Bakhtin (1981), language is not a closed, centralized system but a heteroglossia of multiple every day speeches produced by people from diverse walks of life. There is an assortment of *languages* within a single language and this should not be construed as a mere linguistic phenomenon. Language and beyond, heteroglossia is an orchestra of worldviews, each characterized by its objects, meanings, and values. Therefore, Bakhtin's heteroglossia is an assertion of the "primacy of context over text" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 428) that questions all sorts of authoritative and centralized discourses and, thus, allows fresh interpretation of what is believed to be fixed and settled.

Bakhtin (1993) was an apostle of polyphonic word views which supports the presence of plural voices in fiction. His idea of "polyphony" is concerned with the relation between the narrator (author) and characters embodied by *distance* and *autonomy*. The author, despite all his sympathies with the characters, must maintain a distance from them. Autonomy means that a character must be independent of the author or any sort of centrally controlling authority. The author and the character must not merge into a single entity promoting a singular worldview. The consciousness of the characters must be independent of the author's.

I empathize actively into an individuality and,
consequently, I do not lose myself completely, nor my
unique place outside it, even for a moment (Bakhtin, 1993,
p. 15)

Bakhtin's (1984a) anti-elite concept of "carnival" is characterized by the inversion of hierarchical order and the undoing of centripetal discourses in a novel. The notion of "carnival" refers to the orchestra of subordinate voices maintaining the polyphony of the novel through the profane enactment of rituals that blur the distinction between the participant and the spectator. The characters, in general, are the participants in the intersubjective plane of interaction built up in a novel. However, authorial distance allows the characters to maintain their positions and enables the enactment of polyphonic voices. Originally, Bakhtin (1984a) argued that Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels are the greatest examples of polyphony.

Dostoyevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel. He
invented a new novelistic genre. The new kind of character

appearing in his work has a voice constructed in the same way as the authorial voice is constructed in an ordinary novel.... The character's speech of himself and of the world is as weighty as the traditional authorial discourse; it is not subordinated to the objective character of the hero, as one of his characteristics; at the same time it does not serve as an expression of the authorial voice. (p. 13)

Accordingly, Dostoevsky's novels allow the complete presence of views that are opposite to the author's own. Without the co-presence of multiple worldviews, a novel relegates to self-indulgence and didacticism. At a later stage, Bakhtin (1993) argued that in contrast to the monologic language of poetry, the language of novels is dialogic. While Bakhtin's distinction between novel and poetry may sound convincing, it is astonishing why he left out drama, which primarily consists of dialogues, in the category of polyphony.

It is common sense to think that Bakhtin, the philosopher of dialogism, would be particularly sympathetic to the drama form in which dialogues are the most natural mode of expression. First, Bakhtin (1993) argues that the porous nature of dramatic language prompts all its characters to speak in the same voice. Second, the monological selection of languages in drama does not allow the dialogic interaction of different registers. On the contrary, this act is especially performed in the novel by the inter-animation of the narrator's all-encompassing language and the language of the characters.

Research in the last three decades has focused on the importance of Bakhtinian dialogues in education and changes in understanding (Edmiston, 1994); contributions of his philosophical language to arts and aesthetics (Haynes, 2002); the relevance of his concept of chronotope to the understanding of specific geography and landscape (Folch-Serra, 1990); the application of Bakhtinian carnivalesque to interpret the postmodern turn in public administration (Boje, 2001); and the critical reading of the conversations of the banquet scenes in the book of Esther from the lens of dialogism, chronotope, and carnival (Wheelock, 2008).

In the domain of literary analysis, M. -Pierrette Malcuzyński (1983) supports Bakhtin's polyphony as an attempt to contest the objectification of a character by an overriding authorial consciousness through pluralistic, dialogic interventions and polyphonic narratives. With a focus on the stylistic, structural, and thematic complexities in William Golding's *Rites of Passage*, Utku Tuğlu (2011) uses the Bakhtinian concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony, and the carnivalesque to conclude that Bakhtin's ideas and Golding's novel illuminate and substantiate each other. According to Sonya Petkova (2005),

Bakhtin's theory of text and dialogism in language and his argument that a work of art is not independent of its sociopolitical and historic context serves as the precursor to post-structuralism. His philosophy of language and literature, especially, his deliberations on intertextuality, culture, and tradition continues through Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes.

David Charles (2005) examines Bakhtin's concepts such as chronotope, prosaics, dialogism, and the carnivalesque to expand the understanding of a highly evocative, improvisational, and community-oriented but marginalized performing art form called the playback theatre. Laurin Porter (1991) applies the concept of chronotope to the study of drama concluding that Eugene O'Neill's plays demonstrate the ultimate control of time over human experience.

According to Helene Keyssar (1991), Bakhtin's poetics has triggered the interest of scholars from diverse backgrounds including feminists and non-feminists, Marxists and anti-Marxists, modernists and postmodernists, social scientists, linguists, psychologists, literary critics, and philosophers. However, the response of drama, theatre, and film scholars is very limited. Against this backdrop, this study argues that Bakhtin's key concepts—dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony—apply not only to drama but also can be used as important tools to analyze the creative principles governing similar forms such as telefilm and cinema. Based on Bakhtin's theories, this study looks forward to analyzing the representation of characters and their diverse voices in *Amaravati ki Kathayen*. The leading research question is: How does Shyam Benegal maintain the properties of dialogism and polyphony in *Amaravati ki Kathayen*?

Narrative codes and conventions in the novel and the teledrama

Regardless of genre or style, however, a novel or a teledrama tells/enacts a story. All good stories share seven common elements: (1) setting, (2) characters, (3) plot, (4) conflict, (5) theme (including motifs and points of view), and (6) narrative arc.

The setting refers to the time and location in which the story/action takes place. A well-founded setting provides the backdrop and environment for the story and enhances the intended mood. The story includes different characters with diverse roles and purposes. Usually, the story is built around a protagonist, an antagonist, and support characters. The plot is the chain of events that connects the audience to the actions and goals of the protagonist and other characters. Conflict is the inevitable existential phenomenon linked to human relations. Conflicts drive the story, create tension, and bring the elements of curiosity and suspense to the story.

The theme is all about the story and its manifested meaning, philosophy, or ideology. It may be presented as the author's philosophy or, at least,

opinion on life. The story usually contains a major theme that is prominent and continuous and supported by many sub-themes. The sub-themes often emerge from a variety of motifs and points of view. The narrative arc refers to the dynamic progress of the story, usually in a trajectory of setup, rising tensions, climax, and resolution.

Narratives within the novel and the teledrama refer to the sequence of events that is remediated into a story, enabled by a wide variety of codes and conventions. Narrative codes are the physical elements that the audience experiences whereas narrative conventions are usually implied. Conventions exist in the minds of the audience rather than being explicitly seen in the narrative.

Table 1. The novel and the teledrama as creative art forms

Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Codes refer to the technical and symbolic tools used to construct or suggest meaning in creative forms and products. • In the film, codes refer to the use of camera, acting, setting, <i>mise en scene</i>, editing, lighting and special effects, sound and silence, colour combinations, and visual frames. • Many such codes such as acting, setting, descriptions of light, sound and music, costume and make-up, body language, voice and dialogue, and movements operate in the novel too.
Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conventions are the rules or generally accepted modes of constructing and informing meaning in novels and films. Conventions are continual processes of constructing creative works, using codes that, over time, tend to be accepted by audiences. • Conventions include story principles, form and structure, generic structures, story, theme, and motifs, character and story arcs, cause and effect, point of view, and the structuring of time. • The novel as a creative form uses <i>narration and description</i> as the twin tools for unfolding the story, characters, conflicts, points of view, and the time-space boundary they are subjected to. • The teledrama <i>enacts</i> these elements by using background voice and voice-overs, sound and light effects, soliloquies and asides, camera angles, and colour schemas. This is further improvised through the editorial freedom post-production and before it is presented to the audiences.

In an authoritative work of art, the centrality of authorial philosophy is so overwhelming that it provides little scope for expressing multiple visions of life. On the other hand, as Bakhtinian poetics proposes, in a dialogic work of art, the visions of life emerge from an array of arguments and dialogues, points of view, and a disconcerted polyphony of voices. The use of special effects, camera angles, and enormous editorial freedom can make a film truly dialogic, at least, if the director intends so.

Methods

Two episodes are collected from YouTube for critical analysis. They are (1) “*Karz*” (Provideoindia, 2017a) and (2) “Don’t Tell Anyone” (Provideoindia, 2017b). Although there are several episodes in the series, these two episodes were selected especially based on the protagonists’ peculiar predicament (i.e., their cognitive inability to comprehend the motives and actions of people in society and their struggles to articulate their positions).

The common link between these two episodes is that the protagonist is a naive and marginalized person. The protagonist of “*Karz*” (The Loan) is troubled by class and caste-based exploitation whereas the protagonist of “Don’t Tell Anyone” is tormented by the behavior of his dominant wife in particular and the rational but deceptive society in general. Both are vulnerable because they trust the people and the social system around them. Above all, the protagonists of both films represent the oppressed humanity within the narrow precincts of their society.

The analytical framework

It seems to be an irony that Bakhtin, the philosopher who emphasized the ideas of theatricality, dialogism, visuality, interaction, and embodied activity as the canon of his poetics, could be so particularly pessimistic about drama where these very practices are the governing principles. This study demonstrates that Bakhtin’s poetics, despite its reservations against drama, has a lot to offer in terms of its potential to understand the dramatic form.

Bakhtin’s (1981) prejudices against drama are grounded in their space-time limitations. First, he argues that drama stopped being a serious genre after Shakespeare. This perception, perhaps, draws its authority from the limitations of the theatrical practices of his time. Second, Bakhtin argues that the dramatic dialogue is less capable of reflecting the divided mind of a character. Interestingly, the dramatic dialogue of the novel provides Bakhtin with the high morals to demonstrate the technical superiority of novelistic dialogism and multi-voicedness. Third, because of his overwhelming interest in the interaction of the author and characters, Bakhtin overlooks the creative, affective, and interpretive involvement of the audience in dramatic performances.

In realist drama or theatre, the dialogue has to be materially articulated by the actor or the character. Therefore, it is practically impossible to be multi-voiced in the Bakhtinian sense. However, there are many other theatrical genres where dialogism is a recurrent phenomenon. In non-realist plays, the plurality of the actor’s mind is often voiced using the proscenium arch or the deep stage, or a second stage. In the Indian opera tradition, the

same is often articulated using the dim light of the stage, the concurrence of background voice (pre-recorded) with the self-lost posture of the actor on stage. According to Dick McCaw (2016),

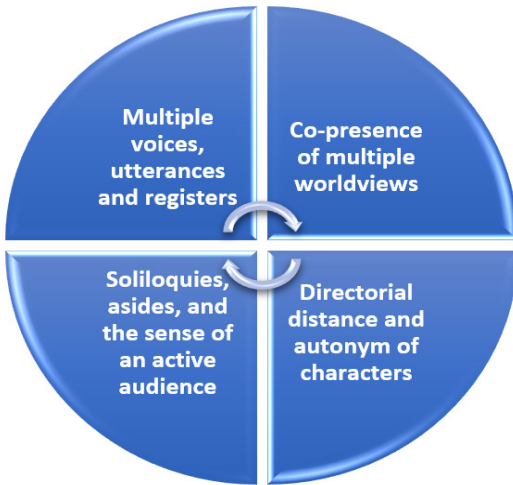
Before the auditorium was darkened and separated from the stage by the proscenium arch, the actor would address their public which was visibly and audibly present. This is true of Shakespeare's stage, of the pageant wagons of mystery cycles, or the portable booth and trestle stages of miracle plays and the touring troupes of the Commedia dell' Arte. (p. 217)

Double-voicing is an inherent feature of the theatre in the soliloquies of an actor and the asides directed at the audience. In many plays of Shakespeare, such as *As You Like It* or *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, a subtle and creative doubling of the world is metaphorically represented through the metadramatic references to the world as a stage and the people as actors. On a more tangible note, the metadrama of *Hamlet* that correlates politics with theatre is significantly multi-voiced. According to McCaw (2016), this is possible because of "the acknowledged presence of the audience" (p. 217). Such varying manifestations of dramatic dialogism waned because of the shift in the trend in favor of the realist play where actors tend to exchange their dialogues with other actors on the stage instead of directly addressing the audience. Compared to the theatre, maintaining a plurality of voices is a tad easier in the film and the cinema, partly because the action does not take place in the immediate presence of the audience and partly because of the abundance of editorial freedom *vis-à-vis* audio-visual effects.

According to McCaw (2016), the theatre researcher's perception of the modes of life, creativity, and theatre-making is different from that of the novel critic. Therefore, Bakhtin's theories must be applied with caution to the analysis of theatre, particularly when it comes to studying the ethics and aesthetics of the character. The Bakhtinian notion of *character*, with its precise and trivial details, cannot be perfectly applied to the study of the creative process of the theatre. On this note, this study develops a framework (see Figure 1) for the identification and analysis of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony in the selected episodes of *Amaravati ki Kathayen*.

The two texts selected are very much play-like and not movie-like. A movie is a motion picture of two or three hours produced to be shown in the theatre hall right before the audience. A telefilm is also a motion picture but produced solely to be telecasted for television viewers. In this respect, all the episodes in the series *Amaravati ki Kathayen* are 35 to 50 minutes only and were produced for television only. The production of a teledrama requires

Figure 1. The analytical framework of the study



the knowledge and skill of both stage drama and television production. Finally, a movie has greater freedom to manipulate time and space whereas a teledrama is constrained by time and place of action. In the selected texts, the entire action is confined to a few characters in specific settings, and the pitch of the action moves slowly to unfold the conflicts dramatically and ends with the background voice pronouncing the baffling confusions and trauma in the minds of the protagonist.

In continuation of the discussion on the commonalities in the narrative codes and conventions between the novel and the film, this study proposes that a teledrama, to a great extent, can match the narrative liberty of a novel. It can be dialogic and polyphonic in several ways. Figure 1 displays the polyphonic nature of *Amaravati ki Kathayen* in four inter-connected quartets. It argues that the episodes do not forward any central, authoritative discourse. Characters act and speak their mind according to their role and context. In a few situations where dialogue is not possible, asides and soliloquies are used, acknowledging the off-the-stage presence of an active audience that shares the feelings of a character. The director maintains his distance from the characters and no single character or perspective is given any special importance.

Analysis

The introductory title song, a ballad common to all episodes, is translated as follows:

*Krishna tat par Amaravati Nagar
Jahna bam bam bam bhola Amaralingeswar.
Jhimiri jhimiri nadi bahe katha kahe re
Bina bole hasi khushi byatha kahe re.
Khathe mithe rang chune bune zindagi
Mehe mehe meheke Amaravati ki kathayen
Mehe mehe meheke Amaravati ki kathayen.* (Provideoindia, 2017a & b)

[On the banks of Krishna river stands the Amaravati city
That is the abode of Bholenath, Lord Amarlingeswar.
There flows the river slowly, telling many stories,
Without uttering a word, it tells the stories of pain and
pleasure.
Selecting colors sweet and sour, it weaves the threads of life,
Filling the stories of Amaravati with the fragrance of life.]

The ballad is sung by an omniscient bard, supported by a chorus. It is accompanied by a musical concert using indigenous instruments that add to the folkloric simplicity and earthiness of the tales enacted in the teledramas. The visual spectacle captures the temple and the devotees, the river and the ferry boat, the worship of and offerings to Lord Amarlingeswar, a vagrant folk artist roaming around the village streets playing traditional musical instruments, ladies washing attires in the river water and children relishing water sports, a fisherman netting in the river, and finally, the manuscript of the sourcebook *Amaravati Kathalu* whose cover page displays the picture of Lord Amaralingeswar.

Episode 1: “Karz” (The Loan)

“Karz” exposes the vulnerability of a poor peasant vis-a-vis an unscrupulous money-lender in a typical cultural setting of Andhra Pradesh. The introductory voice announces:

It is a fact that when oppression and exploitation cross their limits, even the weakest people protest them and the lame people stand on their legs and run forward to challenge them. However, the story of Rangayya is somehow different (Provideoindia, 2017a, 02:31 – 02:41).

The introductory voice talks about the “vicious cycle of loan” within which the nameless farmer takes birth, lives, and finally, dies. One such farmer is Rangayya whose total property is confined to a piece of barren land, a low-lying, muddy, thatched hut, and a pair of oxen. Twenty years back, his father had borrowed 200 rupees from the father of zamindar Panthulu Garu for the marriage of his sister. The whole life, Rangayya’s father went on paying back but could not settle the loan. The dying father passed on the sacred burden to Rangayya. Since then, Rangayya has been doing his best to get rid of this inter-generational loan by paying three-fourths of his annual harvest to Panthulu Garu. Yet, because of the mysterious calculations of Panthulu Garu, the loan goes on increasing.

“*Karz*”, to a great extent, is a dialogic film. Poverty being the common source of tension, there are two levels of social confrontation in the film: (a) rich versus poor, and (b) poor versus the poor. In both cases, characters

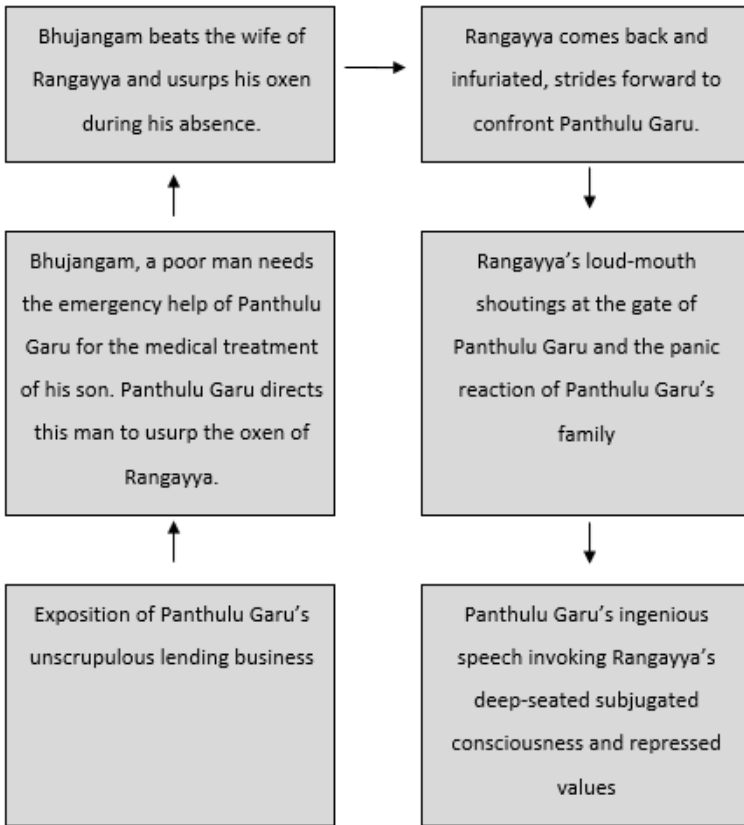


Figure 2. Intergenerational burden, caste and class domination, and the hapless subjectivity of Rangayya

are allowed to express the logic of their actions and concerns. The phonic peculiarity of their dialogues and the typicality of their interpersonal behavior bring out the film equivalence of a dialogic novel.

A shrewd exploiter, Panthulu Garu uses Bhujangam, the poor, against Rangayya, another poor. Bhujangam overpowers the wife of Rangayya and usurps his oxen during Rangayya's absence. While unleashing the oxen from the anchor, Bhujangam bursts out "See, I don't have time with me. My son's life is at a stake at the hospital" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 05:31- 05:34).

Rangayya's loud-mouth shouting at the gate of Panthulu Garu and the panicked reaction of Panthulu Garu's family is a filmic counterpart of the multi-perspective narrations of the modern novel. Powers and perspectives are unfolded in a linear sequence:

- Power: The cunning intellectual prowess of Rangayya versus the daring physical prowess of Rangayya
- Panthulu Garu's perspective: "Don't teach me the lending business. He is daring to shout like this because we have stopped beating him with shoes. We have started giving respect to humans as humans. That's why these people have started straightening their heads. Let him shout" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 09:42 – 09:52).
- Rangayya's perspective: "Of course, my father had ordered me to pay off your loans. Did I ever stop paying back? We lived many days without food—drinking water only. But did I compromise on giving you the promised share from our hard-earned paddy? I paid you the three-fourth of my harvest. While paying back your loan, my life has turned into a cursed night. Because I never opened my mouth in protest. Enough is enough. No more toleration. Now you have to answer each of my questions" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 09:54 – 10:19).
- Panthulu Garu's wife's perspective: "Times have changed. Mindlessly, you should have not snatched his oxen like this. ... People are no longer the way were they were earlier" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 11:28 – 11:31).
- Panthulu Garu's perspective: "The society has not changed at all. Do you think that the society would change because of the loud rants of a mad man?" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 11:32 – 11:34).
- Panthulu Garu's wife's perspective: "It seems that he is going to kill us today. Please return his oxen" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 13:25 – 13:27).
- Panthulu Garu's perspective: "No. Never. Once I return his oxen, everyone in the village would ask for the return for their mortgages" (Provideoindia, 2017a, 13:28 – 13:29).

As a part of this sequence, Rangayya goes on to describe the meanness of Panthulu Garu and his wife. For the first time after the marriage, Rangayya along with his bride came to the doors of Panthulu Garu seeking his blessings. Panthulu's wife was enamored of the beautiful nose ornament of Rangayya's bride. Dictated by Panthulu, Rangayya told his bride to remove the ornament from her nose. The Panthulu couple grabbed the ornament, telling that it would relieve Rangayya significantly off his accumulated loan. On the first day of the Telugu New Year, Rangayya's brother-in-law visited his family with sacks of rice. Panthulu Garu seized all the rice. Rangayya's family had to sleep with an empty stomach that night. Addressing the villagers present there, Rangayya tells that even the worst enemy would never behave the way Panthulu has done against him. The sins of Panthulu have reached the ultimate heights and therefore, he has to pay for them.

Eventually, to save his honor, Panthulu Garu comes out of his house to meet Rangayya. The feudal and the subaltern come face to face. The Brahmin attire of Panthulu Garu with its association with the Hindu religious signifiers mesmerizes Rangayya. His courage starts disintegrating with his voice faltering. The get-up and the posture of Panthulu Garu implant a *visual discourse of superiority* before he even starts his counseling-cum-lecture at Rangayya.

Panthulu Garu's ingenious lecture at Rangayya is an example of the extreme distortions of the Hindu *dharmic* (religious) traditions. It uses the illiteracy and credulity of the subaltern to justify an *intergenerational debt theory* in terms of an imagined father-son, brahman-non-brahman, and lord-tenant relationship. By mixing up stray jargon arbitrarily hijacked from the Hindu religious texts, it fabricates a discourse where the duties of the poor override his rights and where exploitation is codified as sacred principles. The lecture invokes the servile unconscious of Rangayya—tears of repentance flow from his eyes and he asks for forgiveness.

Finally, Rangayya is fully socialized into a hegemonic pattern of feudal superiority and submissiveness of the poor. The agitated subaltern is dramatically lulled into slumber, but the audience is made to wake up in revolt. The scathing irony of the sequence feeds on the brutality of the oppressor and the plight of the oppressed, on the deceptive dialogues of Panthulu Garu, and on the waking, cracking anger of the audiences.

Rangayya is a victim of triple violence: economic, social, and epistemic. The economic violence is exercised through an intergenerational loan that is a debt trap. Social violence is manifest in class and caste hegemony. The epistemic violence is propagated through nihilistic discourses. When it is not possible to control people by economic and social powers, discursive power fills the shoes of the oppressor. Rangayya may have been fooled by

the cunning word-plays of Panthulu Garu, but the audience can fully decode the verbal gimmicks of his speech.

“*Karz*” banks on the sympathies of the audience towards Rangayya that wakes up steadily in a trajectory of passive to semi-active to fully active reactions to the acts of Panthulu Garu. In this fully charged field of emotions, the characters, Rangayya and Panthulu Garu transcend their narrow context and limited roles to be seen as the symbols of the oppressed and the oppressor in the wider context of Indian society.

Episode 2: “Don’t Tell Anyone”

Sankarayya is the proprietor of a typical street side, thatched, makeshift restaurant that prepares local snacks such as *idli*, *dosa*, *bada*, and *chutney* for visitors of Lord Amaralingeswar. He is naive, humble, and unable to assert his authority. His position is subverted and therefore, he does not get the respect a proprietor deserves. His wife, Subbamma, commands the business, and to a great extent, uses Sankarayya as the servant of the restaurant. In course of her urban upbringing, Subbamma has mastered a few English jargon and slang that she often uses to release her anger and frustration against Sankarayya. She habitually scolds Sankarayya as “nonsense! bloody, fool!”

Sankarayya is the protagonist of “Don’t Tell Anyone.” He is present in all the scenes and basically, the film revolves around him. However, his voice is neither the central nor the dominant voice of the film. There are several characters whose opinions and judgments are independent, although many of them are sympathetic to Sankarayya.

Sankarayya’s position as a man is undermined within his family. Subbamma orders him to get out of the restaurant and look out for customers. He succeeds in inviting a group of customers to his restaurant, serves them *idli* and *dosa*, but refuses to serve additional *chutney* referring to a hanging notice board that his clumsy voice reads out as “No extra *chutney*...by order....etc.” (Provideindia, 2017b, 03:29 – 03:33).

Sankarayya is split between his fear of Subbamma and the demands and rants of the customers. He is inept in calculating the bills and counting the coins. In the next scene, Subbamma finds that he has collected 1.5 rupees less from the customers. He is forced to go out and find the customers near the temple. All the customers justify their payments with logic and evidence. Sankarayya’s frail memory, misunderstanding of numbers, and lack of assertiveness are fully exposed here. When one of the customers accuses him of trailing him, he apologetically turns back with a helpless dramatic aside “What can I do? I have to listen to everybody” (Provideindia, 2017b, 06:28).

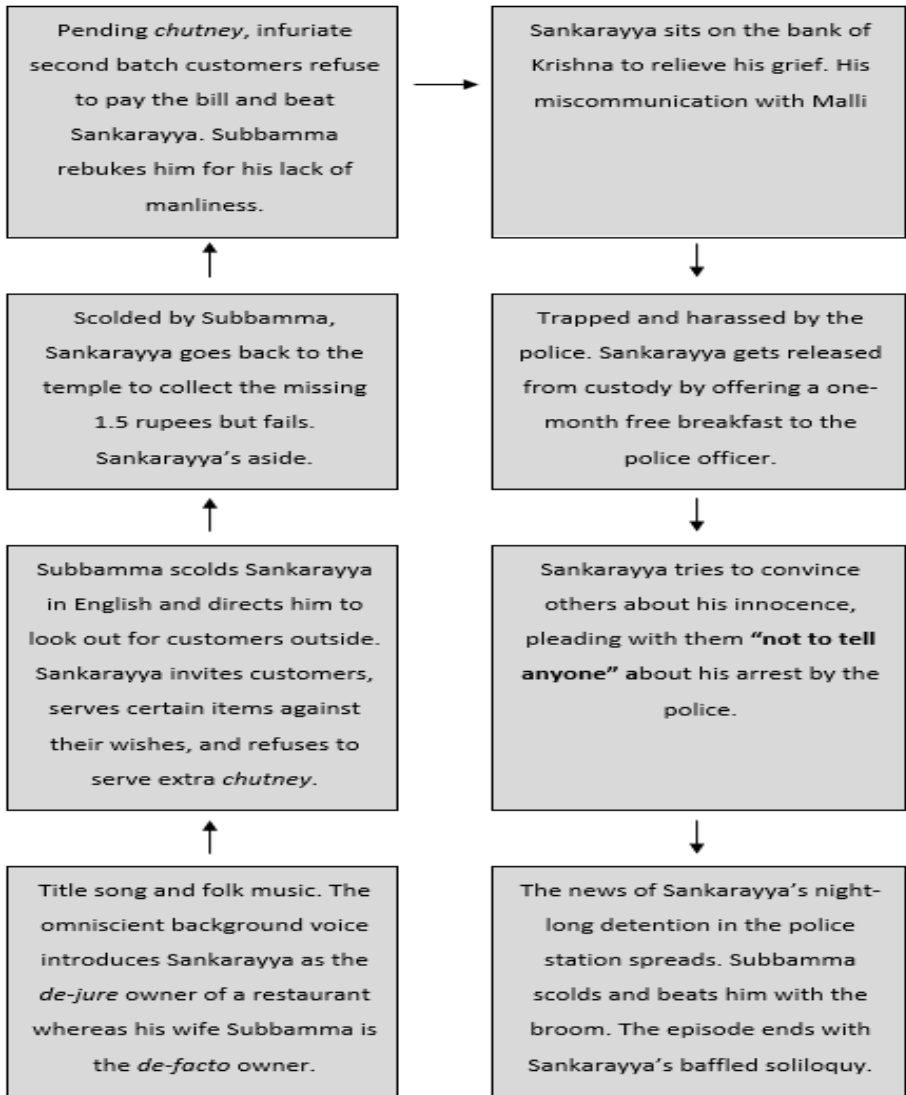


Figure 3. Incongruity of situations, domestic and social apathy, and the hapless subjectivity of Sankarayya

In the next scene, a team of young customers is invited for the breakfast. They don't like *idli* (a soft, pillowy, steamed, savory cake made from rice and lentil batter), but Sankarayya serves them *idli* against their order. His logic - *idli* is good for health - irritates the customers. Later, they ask for extra *chutney* (a ground paste made from lentils, vegetables, and tamarind), and Sankarayya, as per his habits, refuses to serve extra *chutney*. In retaliation, the customers refuse to pay the bill. Sankarayya argues with them and

threatens to call the police. One of the young and aggressive customers beats him, challenging him to dare to call the police. Subbamma rushes to the spot in support of Sankarayya, but the infuriated customers leave the spot without paying the bill. Subbamma rants at Sankarayya citing this as the fallout of his cowardice and lack of manliness, ranting at him: “Are you a man or a mosquito?” (Provideoindia, 2017b, 10:00).

The beauty of this teledrama, so far, is that the customers, Subbamma, and Sankarayya are all right from their perspectives and within their limitations. Although Sankarayya’s character is pitted against the rest, no single perspective dominates the script. The audience, thus, is made to understand the vulnerability of Sankarayya but not by blaming the speech and actions of the rest of the characters. The speech acts used by the customers are heterogeneous, and so also their temperament and manners—as reflected in their choice of words and syntax.

In the next scene, grief-sunk Sankarayya is seen sitting at the bank of river Krishna. He sees Malli, a poor girl collecting firewood for cooking. Sankarayya wishes to chat with Malli so that he can get some consolation from her. He pleads with Malli to talk to him, but she ignores him. To initiate a conversation, he asks Malli about her income from the firewood collection. She feels irritated by this question and retorts that it is none of his business. Sankarayya comments that she looks very weak and skinny, and pleads her to come to his restaurant where he will serve her small and tender *idlis*. Malli misunderstands the humble words of Sankarayya as a trap and accuses him of being a flirt and a womanizer. The irony of the situation grows stronger with Malli vociferously shouting at Sankarayya and calling for the police.

The corrupt police officer shows no mercy for Sankarayya and arrests him and detains him the whole night at the police station. He and his deputy threaten Sankarayya with the possibility of levying many criminal charges including rape, arson, and communal riot so that he may have to be in the prison for 20 years. Sankarayya tries his best to justify his innocence but fails. Finally, he manages to leave the police station by offering a one-month free breakfast with “extra *chutney*” to the officer.

On his way back to the restaurant, Sankarayya comes across several familiar persons from different professions. He naively talks about the unreasonable reactions of Malli and the unfair detention by the police. All of them blame Sankarayya as an eve-teaser although they are sympathetic to him. He tries to convince everybody about his innocence, declaring himself as an *izzatdar admi* (respectable person). He leaves each of them after extracting their promise that they would never reveal this incident. This part of the film is truly polyphonic where people from diverse professions speak

in their style of Hindi with their typical utterances. In each conversation, there is a perceptible phonological and stylistic difference between the dialogues of Sankarayya and the person before him.

The Indian word-of-mouth is vicious. Back in the restaurant, Subbamma interrogates him about his night-long absence. Sankarayya tries to cover up the real incident but fails. Subbamma beats him with a broom. In the last scene, a saddened Sankarayya is seen washing the dishes. He takes a break and talks to himself “I requested everybody. With folded palms and by touching their feet, requested them not to tell anyone. But how could this news spread around?” (Provideoindia, 2017b, 21:28 – 21:42). He waves his left palm around his head which means “I don’t understand”. Soft string music follows, adding to the poignancy of the note.

The film does not forward any single point of view. Each of the characters is right from his/her perspective. The director does not cast any specific character or ideology as good or bad. As the alternative, he positions the Telugu cultural context and the familiarity of the audiences with the same as an invisible background against which the limitations and the perspectives of the characters are drawn out.

Conclusion

The dramatic dialogue in drama and the dramatized dialogue in the narrative forms are always encased in a firm and stable monologic framework. In drama, of course, this monologic framework does not find direct verbal expression, but precisely in drama is it especially monolithic (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 17).

According to Bakhtin (1984), the characters in a drama interact in “the unified field of vision of the author, director, and audience” (p. 17) and dramatic rejoinders are not truly “multi-leveled,” and the structure of a drama cannot afford to keep open all dialogic oppositions, because “true multiplicity of levels” would tear down the dramatic form.

Critical response to such claims is limited, but a handful of critics have discussed the historical and theoretical limitations of Bakhtin’s poetics. According to Keyssar (1991), Bakhtin’s understanding of drama is founded on the Aristotelian theory of the “unity of plot” contributed by the collective unity of action, place, and time. Aristotle believed that drama should be an “action complete in itself.” In *The Poetics*, Aristotle (2000) advises playwrights to remove all episodes (i.e., the thoughts, experiences, and actions of a character) that could have a disjoining and dislocating effect on the drama as a whole.

Bakhtin’s notion of the limitations of drama, according to Keyssar (1991), is grounded on classical Western drama, and more explicitly, on the

Renaissance plays. Bakhtin is silent about the modern dramatic literature that starts in the mid-nineteenth century. A bulk of the modern drama, in effect, rejects monologism and patriarchy, and forwards “a dramatic discourse that celebrates rather than annihilates or exiles difference” (p. 93).

Graham Pechey (1987, p. 77) considers Bakhtin’s ascription of drama as monolithic as “opportunistic.” He views the epic theatre of Brecht as a sort of novelized drama. Applying Bakhtin’s concepts, he critiques Brecht’s theatre as “nothing less than a (non-)dramatic dialogism” (p. 77) where dialogues and actions are “not only shown but told” (p. 77). Recognizing the epistemic merits of Bakhtin’s poetics, this study calls into question his essentialist position on drama as a monologic art form. Moreover, the use of the twin instrument of camera and editing allows enormous freedom for a film director to sustain a multiplicity of voices in a teledrama. This offers an additional point of motivation to apply Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony to the two episodes from *Amaravati ki Kathayen*.

Episode 1, “*Karz*”, enacts the twin issue of injustice and power gaps and the attendant co-vulnerability of the poor. The power deficits are socioeconomic as well as cognitive. However, the film is open-ended and no explicit moral judgment is forwarded to resolve the differences. On the contrary, differing worldviews of the oppressor and the oppressed are forwarded in style to interanimate each other and stand apart from any type of authorial or directorial intervention. At one level, the voice of the marginal character conflicts with the voice of the dominant character, as in the case of Rangayya versus Panthulu Garu. At another level, the voices of the marginalized folks contend with each other, as in the case of Kanakangi versus Bhujangam. A short teledrama like “*Karz*” may not have the freedom of a novel to give vent to an array of intricate, multi-layered worldviews because of its space-time limitations, but within its confines, it builds up powerful dialogues of interpersonal differences.

Bakhtin (1981) also argues that the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky’s novels involves the presentation of diverse social styles of the characters that counter-balance the monotonous style of the author. The characters can speak in a variety of registers catering to the context of their utterance. This restores the “primacy of context over text” (p. 428) that leads to the formation of heteroglossia where different types of speech genres clash and coexist.

The heteroglossia manifested in the polyphonic nature of Episode 2, “Don’t Tell Anyone”, is represented in Sankarayya’s context-specific arguments with several characters: Subbamma, the customers, Malli, the police officer, and other individuals. Unfit to stand out in any power game,

Sankarayya succumbs to loss at each stage, but his belief in his innocence is commendable and he tries to defend his position every time. His struggles as well as his self-beliefs are evident in his speech acts and intonations.

This is to bring to the fore that both episodes enact gender roles and power relations in the then-Indian society. In both cases, social power gaps and individual struggles are embodied in the protagonist's cognitive inability to understand politics, especially, the politics of language and dominant discourses around it. In "Don't Tell Anyone," Sankarayya was "not man enough" to deal with business, people, and society as he struggles to comprehend why he is subjected to humiliation inside as well as outside of his family. In "*Karz*," Rangayya was "man enough" to deal with feudal power and patriarchy, but fails to understand the money lender's queer mathematics of recovering a weird, inter-generational loan from him. Moreover, the logic is embroiled in the intricate philosophy of a casteist social order that subjugates the consciousness of the lower castes, making them unfit to articulate and enact their sense of revolt.

The two episodes examined here are open-ended and, thus, are left to the subjective involvement and interpretations of the audiences. They neither forward any stable and familiar position nor uphold any central, abiding philosophy. Whether in "Don't Tell Anyone" or in "*Karz*," there is no centrally controlling or official mind of the author or the director. The structure of both films is non-linear because they portray a static world where nothing changes significantly. Even after the end of the film, the protagonist remains the same person he was at the beginning. Both the films display what Bakhtin (1981, p. 7), vies for "a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)."

One important question is whether the relevance of Bakhtin's concepts as tools for analysis in the field of drama, theatre, and the film could be generalized, especially, to be applied to every dramatic form. The answer lies in the ingrained limitations of Bakhtin's poetics. For example, Bakhtin (1981) grounded his poetics on his study of Dostoevsky's novels and generalized his vision of creativity as an art form, and stamped his high morals on the novel as a genre. This is to be kept in mind that although a novel is a convenient medium to celebrate dialogic or polyphonic worldviews, not all novels are written with the same intention or spirit. There are hundreds of novels that promote monolithic and arbitrary worldviews. Similarly, a drama or a teledrama can be rendered in several ways and the dialogic dramatic art form is just one of them. Generalizations falling apart, a specific dramatic product may be polyphonic and, if so, can be subjected to the Bakhtinian poetics for scholarly evaluation.

A work of art is always a response to the macro world realities. Dialogism and heteroglossia in literature or film correspond to diversity and pluralism in the real world. The world today is beset with many grave issues such as climate change, economic slowdown, food and water shortage, terrorism, war, and falling human rights. These issues cannot be solved by a single nation or by any form of arbitrary display of logic or power. Dialogue-based negotiations founded on the principles of peaceful co-existence are important for sustaining life on the earth. In this context, the role of literature, theatre, or cinema should be to promote the values of democracy and pluralistic worldviews. The role of the critic should be to analyse the classic cultural products as the vehicle of liberal thought and expression and, through analysis and comparison, divulge the values of dialogism and heteroglossia to inform and educate public taste toward peaceful world order. Future research should find out many great cultural products such as *Amaravati ki Kathayen* from the forlorn repositories of regional language-based movies and TV series and identify and promote the values of dialogism, decentralisation, and pluralism as models of existence and thereby, creating a compelling atmosphere for future authors, movie-makers, and TV programme producers to forward these values.

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