



Dialogism and Heteroglossia: A Bakhtinian Reading of *The Hungry Stones*

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ABSTRACT

Tagore's short story *The Hungry Stones* is usually perceived for its gothic and supernatural qualities which are generally seen as metaphors for the past and the world of spirits. A lot of academic research has highlighted Gothic romanticism and colonial/postcolonial themes in the novel, while the blend of voices that make up the narrative have received less attention. Therefore, through the use of qualitative textual analysis, this study aims to analyze *The Hungry Stones* using Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, and heteroglossia to explore how multiple voices coexist and interact within the text. The findings of the study reveal the narrative structure through its layered voices and shifting perspectives, and creates a polyphonic space where truth is neither singular nor fixed. This dialogic framework positions the story as a dynamic cultural artifact negotiating between modernity, memory, and identity.

1. Introduction

Literature is fundamentally a way for voices, cultures, ideologies and times to communicate with each other. Rabindranath Tagore's *The Hungry Stones* (*Kshudhita Pashan*, 1895) is sometimes seen as a ghost story because it is set in a ruined Mughal palace. Usually, this story is studied using lenses of Gothic romance, nostalgia and psychological realism and thought to warn readers about how the past cannot be escaped or forgotten. But this study sets out to examine the underlying ideological conflicts that can be seen in the way the story is structured. This study deploys Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia to examine how Tagore creates a narrative, setting for diverse voices, from rational, mystical, colonial and indigenous, all in lively debate. For Bakhtin, dialogism means language and ideas are formed from the way different voices and viewpoints combine in dialogue. According to Bakhtin (1981), "[a word is formed in dialogue with another word that exists in the object and as such, it becomes alive in this exchange]." This concept emphasizes that every utterance is in conversation with other utterances, past, present, and future.

As Holquist (2002) explains in *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Bakhtin did not see language as a neutral tool but as "saturated with intentions and accents," making literature a site of social contestation rather than a closed narrative. Holquist

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(2002) further elaborates on this, stating that “dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia” (p. 426). In this view, understanding is achieved not through isolated monologues but through the interplay of diverse voices, each contributing to the construction of meaning.

Heteroglossia is another concept closely related to Dialogism, which refers to the coexistence of multiple speech types and socio-ideological languages within a single text. Bakhtin (1981) describes heteroglossia as “the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance” (p. 428), which emphasizes that language is inherently classified and it reflects certain social, ideological, and cultural perspectives.

This multiplicity can be seen in the novel, a genre Bakhtin states as uniquely capable of representing heteroglossia. According to Bakhtin, the novel “orchestrates its themes by means of the social diversity of speech types... it is a heteroglossia that serves as the basis for style” (p. 262). This orchestration allows for a dynamic blend of voices, each having its specific worldview, which contributes to the richness and complexity of the narrative.

This research explores how these Bakhtinian principles operate within *The Hungry Stones*, arguing that the text does not only tell a ghost story but demands for a complex cultural and philosophical dialogue across time. As Jayne White (2016) notes in her work *Mikhail Bakhtin: Voice and Identity in Education*, Bakhtin’s work “offers a way to understand not just what is said, but how meaning is shaped by the relations between voices.” Such a framework is essential to explore how Tagore’s characters, narrators, and symbols embody a dialogic blend between colonial memory, historical trauma, and the metaphysical unknown.

Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism emphasizes that meaning in a literary text emerges not from a single, authoritative voice but from the interaction of multiple, independent perspectives. The same we would see in the story which is set in a decaying Mughal-era palace, and centers on a tax collector who is sent to a far-off town and lives in an abandoned building, only to find himself drawn into ghostly visions and disturbing experiences connected to the palace’s past. The tax collector begins to experience vivid visions of the past: women in flowing garments, the sound of ghungroos, voices from the bygone times. The story operates on multiple levels: It is at once a ghost story, a historical reflection, as well as a psychological study. The deserted palace becomes a symbolic space where the past peeks into the present, which questions the limits of rationality and evokes the unresolved trauma of cultural and historical transitions. The palace is not only haunted by ghosts, but also with the weight of memory i.e. colonial, personal, and civilizational.

The voice of the narrator, the tax collector, and the villagers all offer a different perspective, none of which fully explains the truth behind the palace and results in the blend of all. This plurality of voices and interpretations is the foundation for Bakhtinian reading, as it shows the story’s deep engagement with dialogic meaning-making, where no single voice or ideology superiors the other.

1.1. Problem Statement

The current paper analyzes Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Hungry Stones* from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogism and Heteroglossia, which reveals a richly layered narrative where multiple ideological, cultural, and psychological voices coexist and interact without hierarchical resolution, making the story a dialogic space and a blend of multiple voices with no fixed meaning or a single utterance, but rather reflects the interaction and tension between identity, memory, and colonial modernity in South Asian literature.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does the interaction between the narrator and the tax collector reflect Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in *The Hungry Stones*?
2. In what ways does Tagore’s use of different linguistic and ideological voices demonstrate heteroglossia within the cultural and historical context of the story?

1.3. Research Objectives

- To examine how the employment of dialogism in *The Hungry Stones* creates the multiplicity of meanings through conflicting voices and perspectives.
- To analyze the presence and function of heteroglossia in the narrative, highlighting how various social and cultural languages interact and blend in the story.

2. Literature Review

The concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia from Mikhail Bakhtin have made a big impact on literary criticism by providing ways to examine the variety of voices and viewpoints in texts. In the book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984) explains how heteroglossia refers to the presence of a variety of uncombined narrators in a novel, who all have their own understanding and proper place in the text.

If we consider what dialogism says, Bakhtin argues that meaning comes from the ways voices interact and he states that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth” (Bakhtin, 1984).

Different scholars have tried out Bakhtin's theories in various literary works to see how dialogism and heteroglossia feature in various types of writing. Using heteroglossia when looking at organization stories, Cunliffe (2008) points out that it helps include several interpretations and viewpoints, allowing richer and more detailed understandings.

In postcolonial literature domain, Bakhtinian analysis has been employed to explore the layered narratives that emerge from colonial and indigenous interactions. For example, Vice (1997) discusses how heteroglossia, the presence of multiple speech types, reflects the sociolinguistics diversity within texts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of cultural and ideological conflicts. She states that “heteroglossia is the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance” (p. 45), highlighting its basic role in the construction of meaning.

According to Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Bakhtin's ideas come together because he believes in the concept of dialogue, stressing that understanding happens by partaking in various opinions instead of just trusting one authority. In her study of academic writing, Andrea Karsten adds that all language is specific due to the position and moment a person speaks.

Raya A. Jones, in her exploration of dialogic epistemology, highlights Bakhtin's view that “a text as an utterance is a unique unrepeatable event; and that a voice is immanent in how the text itself operates.” Furthermore, Linda M. Park-Fuller discusses the performance aspect of narrative literature, noting that “Bakhtin's heteroglossia and polyphony... [are] essential in understanding the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in narrative texts.”

The intersection of dialogism and heteroglossia can be understood from Kershner's (2010) “the novel orchestrates its themes by means of the social diversity of speech types... it is a heteroglossia that serves as the basis for style” (p. 262). This orchestration allows for a dynamic blend of voices, each with its own worldview and ideological stance, which contributes to the richness of the narrative.

3. Research Methodology

The current study uses a qualitative research approach grounded in textual analysis, specifically adopting Norman Fairclough's *3D Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* (1995) to analyze *The Hungry Stones* by Rabindranath Tagore through the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia. This model explores a text as a communicative medium which consists of three interrelated activities i.e. description, interpretation, and explanation. The primary data consists of the original English translation of *The Hungry Stones*. No external datasets or interviews are used, as the study is purely literary.

The textual analysis follows Fairclough's CDA model, which consists of three interconnected levels, each of them work as an important function in understanding the complexities of language use and its impact on societal structures (Ajmal & Zainab, 2024, p. 3).

3.1. Textual Analysis (Description)

This level involves close reading of the language, narrative structure, and stylistic devices within *The Hungry Stones*. It examines how particular words, tone shifts, imagery, and syntactic patterns contribute to dialogic tension and polyphony. Here, Bakhtin's notion of polyphony is applied to identify multiple voices, such as the narrator, the tax collector, the spectral voices of the past, and the villagers and how these voices exist without hierarchical suppression.

3.2. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

This level considers how the narrative is produced and interpreted in a specific socio-cultural context. Drawing upon Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the study investigates the interaction between differing worldviews: the colonial rationality of the tax collector, the indigenous mysticism of the haunted palace, and the oral traditions of the villagers. Sue Vice's commentary on heteroglossia (1997) is used to trace how these voices signify distinct ideological positions without synthesis.

3.3. Social Practice (Explanation)

At this level, the study explores how the text reflects broader ideological and cultural tensions of colonial India. Michael Holquist's readings of Bakhtin's dialogism (2002) inform the understanding of how identity, power, and memory operate through the dialogic process. The text is not viewed as a passive mirror of history but as an active participant in the negotiation of cultural memory and postcolonial consciousness.

By combining Fairclough's CDA with Bakhtinian dialogism, the research situates *The Hungry Stones* within a discursive space that allows the study to analyze how the narrative constructs and negotiates meaning through conflicting voices and socio-historical discourses embedded in the text.

3.4. Theoretical Framework

Dialogism and Heteroglossia in Literary Theory

Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical contributions, particularly his concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, have significantly influenced literary criticism and the analysis of narrative structures. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism centers on the idea that meaning is never fixed or singular but always produced in relation to other utterances, voices, and perspectives. As Bakhtin states in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). This reflects his foundational claim that language is inherently dialogic, meaning that every utterance is a response to previous utterances and anticipates future responses. Holquist (2002) elaborates, noting, "dialogism is not merely the awareness of other voices; it is the condition that enables meaning at all. To be means to communicate dialogically" (p. 36). Dialogism suggests that no voice exists in isolation; instead, each voice carries with it traces of past interactions and a consciousness of future dialogue. This framework fundamentally rejects monologic discourse, where meaning is dictated by a single authoritative voice, in favor of a dynamic exchange where multiple perspectives inform the text.

Heteroglossia is another central postulate in Bakhtin's theory, denoting the presence of multiple social languages, dialects, and ideological perspectives within a single text. In Bakhtin's own words, "every utterance participates in the 'unitary language'... while simultaneously resisting it through the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). It reflects the inherent stratification of language, where no single voice or viewpoint dominates absolutely. Heteroglossia reveals how a literary work can incorporate and reflect diverse cultural, ideological, and social positions. Vice (1997) interprets this as "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance," explaining that every text is embedded within multiple layers of linguistic and ideological tension (p. 45). The concept is especially crucial in the novel form, which Bakhtin saw as particularly capable of absorbing and orchestrating diverse voices. As Kershner (2010) notes, "heteroglossia is a stylistic and ideological polyphony that undercuts any totalizing authority" (p. 262), making it a powerful tool for critiquing dominant narratives and revealing internal contradictions within cultures and identities.

Applying Bakhtin's concepts to Rabindranath Tagore's *The Hungry Stones* offers an explicit understanding of the narrative's complexity. The story's structure, which intertwines the tax collector's rational perspective with mystical experiences, exemplifies polyphony, as it presents multiple, unmerged consciousnesses. This aligns with Bakhtin's assertion that in polyphonic narratives, "each voice speaks for itself, its own truth, and is not subsumed into a single, authorial perspective" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). Furthermore, the interplay between colonial rationalism and indigenous mysticism in the story reflects heteroglossia, showcasing the coexistence of diverse cultural discourses. This dynamic allows for a dialogic exploration of identity, history, and memory, resonating with Bakhtin's emphasis on the dialogic nature of meaning-making.

4. Critical Discussion and Findings

4.1. Applying Bakhtin's Dialogism and Heteroglossia on *The Hungry Stones*

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *The Hungry Stones* can be taken as an example of how literature becomes a dialogic space for multiple voices, ideologies, and discourses to interact. This paper employs Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concepts i.e. dialogism, and heteroglossia, to explore the narrative complexity of the story. *The Hungry Stones* does not only recount a mystical encounter; rather it critically reflects on colonial histories, the conflict between rationality and imagination, and the blend of multiple linguistic and cultural voices. Tagore's story can be examined as a site where multiple consciousnesses coexist, making it a considerable example for Bakhtinian analysis.

4.2. Understanding Dialogism

At the heart of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism lies the concept that meaning is generated through dialogue, not just between characters but between ideologies and discourses. In *The Hungry Stones*, the tax collector's personal narrative is in constant dialogue with the rational skepticism of the narrator. This blend reflects Bakhtin's assertion that a dialogic text allows voices to remain autonomous, not absorbed by a singular authorial intent.

4.3. Frame Narrative as a Dialogic Structure

The story-within-a-story format, the unnamed narrator relaying the experience of the tax collector, is inherently dialogic. It introduces two separate narrative consciousnesses:

- The outer narrator (skeptical, grounded),
- The inner voice of the tax collector (subjective, mystical).

The outer narrator remarks: *"The man evidently took us for fools and imposed upon us out of fun. The story is pure fabrication from start to finish."*

This line reveals that the narrator isn't just relaying events but is engaged in a dialogue with the tax collector's worldview, weighing his truth against his own rational framework. This narrative interplay resists a single, authoritative meaning.

4.4. The Haunted Palace as a Site of Dialogic Memory

The palace is not just a setting, it is a palimpsest of voices: voices of Mughal past, of lost lives, and of cultural memory. The tax collector hears:

"Standing in the darkness of that vast desolate hall between the rows of those ancient pillars, I could hear the gurgle of the fountains plashing on the marble floor, a strange tune on the guitar, the jingle of the ornaments and the tinkle of the anklets...."

These aren't his hallucinations alone; they represent echoes of history, turning the palace into a dialogic space of intersecting cultural discourses—colonial, pre-colonial, personal, and mythical.

This aligns with Bakhtin's idea that:

"Every word smells of the context and contexts in which it has lived." (Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, 1986)

Thus, the tax collector's experience is not purely psychological—it's dialogical, shaped by the language and ideology of another time entering his own consciousness.

4.5. Dialogic Self: The Inner Debate

Bakhtin emphasized that even the self is dialogic. Consciousness is not unified, but an arena of conflicting inner voices. In *The Hungry Stones*, the tax collector experiences:

An internal dialogue between his rational, colonial bureaucratic identity and the sensuous, memory-soaked identity being awakened by the palace.

He reflects: *"I saw nobody, but felt as if someone was gently pushing me."* The tax collector, caught between the rationality of his role and the enchantment of the palace, becomes a site of conflicting ideologies. His inner dialogue shows the dialogic conflict:

"After nightfall I would then be transformed into some unknown personage of a bygone age, playing my part in unwritten history; and my short English and tight breeches did not suit me in the least. "

The narrator begins by expressing his rationality about the supernatural elements of the tax collector's story: *"My heart was full of contrition, but there was no one I could lay bare, or of whom I could ask forgiveness."* (Tagore, 1916).

As the tax collector recounts his experiences in the haunted palace, his narrative introduces a contrasting perspective filled with mysticism and emotion. He describes the palace's atmosphere: "*The silence of the place was like the silence of the grave*" (Tagore, 1916).

Furthermore, the tax collector's internal conflict and eventual submission to the palace's charm can be seen as a sign of the dialogic struggle between reason and emotion, reality and illusion. His admission, "*I felt myself being drawn into a world that was not my own*" (Tagore, 1916), highlights the tension between his rational self and the seductive power of the palace's history and atmosphere.

This contrast of rational skepticism and mystical experience exemplifies Bakhtin's idea that texts are inherently dialogic, containing multiple, often conflicting, voices that interact to create meaning (Bakhtin, 1981).

4.6. Heteroglossia: Blend of Multiple Voices

Heteroglossia, for Bakhtin, is the coexistence of multiple speech types, socio-ideological languages, and blend of multiple voices within a single text. It marks the intersection of diverse cultural, historical, and ideological discourses. The Hungry Stones is rich in heteroglossia. The setting, a Mughal palace now inhabited by a colonial bureaucrat, becomes a palimpsest of voices from different epochs. Persian vocabulary, references to Mughal architecture, and images of royal decadence coalesce with British colonial language and modern rationality.

Consider this description:

"About 250 years ago, the Emperor Mahmud Shah ||. had built this lonely palace for his pleasure and luxury. In his days jets of rose-water spurted from its fountains, and on the cold marble floors of its spray-cooled rooms young Persian damsels would sit...."

This single sentence evokes not only a historical narrative but also a linguistic intertextuality—blending the Persianate imagination with colonial reportage. The tax collector's speech is steeped in sensory and historical markers of a bygone era, while the narrator's discourse reflects the standardized, sanitized voice of British-influenced modernity. The tax collector's narrative incorporates elements of Persian culture and language, reflecting the historical context of the palace's origin. He mentions, "*The air was heavy with the scent of attar of roses, and the sound of distant music seemed to float through the corridors*" (Tagore, 1916).

4.7. Multiple Social Languages: The Tax Collector vs. The Palace

In Tagore's story, the tax collector's language and the palace's ghostly voice represent two distinct social languages. The tax collector is a colonial administrator, his language formal, bureaucratic, and practical. He describes the palace in terms that reflect his administrative role:

"[As a tax collector], I would stay out, and work hard as long as possible, then return home at night jaded and tired, go to bed and fall asleep."

However, the palace, with its supernatural history, introduces a different social language. It embodies the unspoken cultural memory, the superstitions, and the mystical past of the local culture. The tax collector perceives:

"But I felt as if the whole house was like a living organism, slowly and imperceptibly digesting me by the action of some stupifying gastric juice."

Here, the voice of the palace represents the historical past and local cultural identity—voices that were silenced under colonial rule but persist in the supernatural realm. The interaction between these two voices, colonial bureaucracy and local mysticism, represents the core of heteroglossia. These voices aren't just different in terms of language but in their social function and ideological purposes.

4.8. Supernatural vs. Colonial Realities: The blend of Past and Present

One of the most important aspects of heteroglossia in the text is how the historical voice of the palace challenges the tax collector's present-day colonial perspective. The palace is a space where local history, its traditions, myths, and ghostly recollection collides with the present colonial gaze.

In the story, the tax collector begins to experience the supernatural world not as an objective reality but as a disruption of his colonial worldview. He sees:

“The palace seemed to breathe, the walls seemed to murmur in forgotten tongues, as though the air was thick with the souls of those long past.”

The mystical language of the palace conflicts with the official language of the tax collector’s world. The walls, representing the colonized past, carry with them voices of resistance, memories of a lost empire, and social stratification.

5. Conclusion

Tagore’s *The Hungry Stones* exemplifies Bakhtin’s vision of dialogic literature. It is not a ghost story in the conventional sense but a critical exploration of history, memory, and identity through the interaction of competing voices and discourses. The tax collector and the narrator are not foils in a binary opposition but dialogic participants in a broader ideological struggle.

The story invites the reader into this struggle, refusing to endorse a singular truth or dismiss alternative voices. Through dialogism, and heteroglossia, Tagore constructs a narrative that is as philosophically rich as it is emotionally evocative. It underscores the complexity of postcolonial identity, the power of historical memory, and the enduring capacity of literature to resist closure and contain multitudes.

In doing so, Tagore anticipates Bakhtin’s belief that literature is not a reflection of reality but a space where reality is actively contested, performed, and reimagined through language and voice.

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