

Ideological Interactions And Spiritual Healing: A Dialogic Reading Of Mahfouz's Short Story Zaabalawi

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Abstract

This research attempts a reading of Mahfouz's short story Zaabalawi (1961) through Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism. This research focuses on the dialogic interactions of the protagonist with his own consciousness and the society in the form of multiple voices in the text. At various points throughout the story, the protagonist engages in dialogue with his own consciousness as an individual in a specific socio-cultural and religious context, as well as the members of society, on the subject of spiritual healing. This research argues that the protagonist's preference for spiritual healing over medical treatment is an outcome of his dialogic interaction with the socio-cultural and religious realities around him. The ideological nature of language in plays a central role in the development of the protagonist's ideological worldview that spiritual healing is the ultimate treatment for serious physical ailments. This qualitative research, using Alan McKee's method of textual analysis, is a quest to identify such multiple contradictory ideologies expressed in the form of a multitude of voices.

Keywords: Dialogism, Ideology, Bakhtin, Spiritual Healing.

Introduction

This research attempts a reading of Mahfouz's (1961) short story Zaabalawi through Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism. This research focuses on the dialogic interactions of the protagonist with his own consciousness and the society in the form of multiple voices in the text. At various points throughout the story, the protagonist engages in dialogue with his own consciousness as an individual in a specific socio-cultural and religious context, as well as the members of society, on the subject of spiritual healing. This research argues that the protagonist's preference for spiritual healing over medical treatment is an outcome of his dialogic interaction with the socio-cultural and religious reality around him. This worldview is communicated to him

through the ideological nature of language. The ideological nature of language in plays a central role in the development of the protagonist's ideological worldview that spiritual healing is the ultimate treatment for serious physical ailments.

In the story, people from various backgrounds voice their beliefs regarding the legitimacy of spiritual healing over medical treatment. The multiple contradictory perspectives voiced in the text are conceptualized by Bakhtin (1994) as the "multiplicity of voices" (P.49) that indicate certain unmergeable ideologies existing simultaneously in a social space. According to Bakhtin (1994), language is ideological in nature which suggests that language is the means of conceptualizing concepts in the form of words (p.73). Therefore, language is seen as a complex of beliefs that arise from a vast array of social, cultural and religious experiences. These experiences manifest themselves in the form of values, worldviews, or perspectives that exist at social and individual levels. The beliefs and values of a society or group of individuals collectively make up the ideologies. The ideologies in a society act as the normative code which shape the thoughts, actions and interactions of people. Ideologies are communicated mainly through art and language in the form of literature and music. However, multiple contradictory ideologies may also exist in a society. The protagonist of the story has adopted the ideology which favors the effectiveness of spiritual healing over medical treatments and disregards the contradictory ideologies. Therefore, this research also examines the popular songs and paintings mentioned throughout the story to unpack the underlying ideologies that influence the protagonist's worldview. This research is a quest to identify such multiple contradictory ideologies expressed in the form of a multitude of voices that shape the protagonist's worldview regarding spiritual healing.

Mahfouz's (1961) short story *Zaabalawi* is a first person narrative about the quest of the protagonist who remains unnamed throughout the story. The protagonist suffers from an incurable physical ailment to which he seeks spiritual cure as he is not cured by any of the medical treatments. He recalls a memory of his childhood in which his father tells him about the great saint named *Zaabalawi* who had cured his father from a fatal disease. Various other memories of his childhood remind him about the popular songs which sung high praises for *Zaabalawi* and regarded him as spiritual saint having the cure to every known physical disease. He begins the quest for *Zaabalawi* to get his ailment cured and in his quest he encounters numerous people from various professional and cultural backgrounds. He encounters a lawyer trained in shariah (religious law), a government official, a religious bookseller, a calligraphist, a mystic musician and numerous street vendors and shopkeepers. He inquires every single person he meets about the whereabouts of *Sheikh Zaabalawi* and whether he is truly a saint having the power to cure diseases. Majority of the people confirm *Zaabalawi's* saintly figure and regard him as the only person alive possessing the spiritual knowledge to cure serious physical ailments. However, *Zaabalawi* being a saint has no fixed residence and remains untraceable until the end of the story. Toward the end, the protagonist during his quest for *Zaabalawi* meets an owner of wine bar who is hardened drinker. The owner convinces the protagonist to drink with him so the two of them can achieve the same level of communication. The protagonist drinks and in his drunken stupor dreams of a scenic garden and ecstatic world.

Upon his awakening, he is told by the owner that Zaabalawi had visited the place, sat next to him with affection and even tried to awaken him. The protagonist is distressed at his inability to meet Zaabalawi but continues his quest for the healer Zaabalawi with the spirit that one day his quest will be fulfilled.

Thesis Statement

In Mahfouz's (1961) short story *Zaabalawi*, the protagonist's internalization of the ideological perception of spiritual healing as a more effective treatment for physical ailments than medication is purely an outcome of his dialogic interaction with the society. He is engaged in a dialogue with this socio-religious ideology throughout his childhood to adolescence. This ideology is communicated and reiterated repeatedly in the form of a multitude of voices at several stages in his life through the ideological nature of language. This research aims to identify the ideology voiced in the story through the dialogic interaction among characters, to examine the dialogic interaction between the protagonist and the characters of the story and to analyze the blending of protagonist's consciousness with the society's consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Bakhtin's (1994) theory of Dialogism conceptualizes dialogue as "a specific kind of interaction," (p. 62) and not merely an interplay of words and phrases in human communication. The interaction at the ideological level is understood as a dialogue that can occur between characters, with one's own consciousness, and with society. In Bakhtin's understanding of philosophical nature of language, Dialogism is a theoretical concern on how the ideological worldviews of human beings are interconnected and how worldviews are generated through the inherent 'dialogic' nature of languages (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 52). The interconnectedness lies in the influence of a certain ideology from another worldview(s) or in their contradiction. In this manner, multiple ideologies that exist are expressed in the form of 'multiplicity of voices' which remain 'unmerged' due to their affirmative and contradictory nature. Bakhtin's dialogism can help us obtain a unique outlook on how language communicates dialogically and how voices interact within the text at ideological level.

The dialogic nature of language is conceptualized by Bakhtin (1981) as:

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it. (p. 264)

The concept of inherent ideologies embedded within language are explained as:

The topic of the speaker's speech, regardless of what this topic may be, does not become the object of speech for the first time in any given utterance; a given speaker is not the first to speak about it. The object, as it were, has already been articulated, disputed, elucidated, and evaluated in various ways. Various viewpoints, world views, and trends cross, converge, and diverge in it.' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259)

Bakhtin's (1994) concept of 'voice' is not merely the production of sound in human speech, it refers to the worldview or the underlying ideology which is the reflection of the consciousness of an individual through language (p.69).

The analysis of the story *Zaabalawi* from a Bakhtinian lens is appropriate for the subject of this research as it provides the theoretical concepts dealing with the exploration of the ideological or the philosophical aspects of a literary text. Primarily, the concept of dialogism helps in the analysis of ideological blending of society's consciousness with the protagonist's consciousness. As the protagonist's worldview regarding the effectiveness of spiritual healing is a derivative of the social, cultural and religious consciousness at large. Secondly, the multiple ideologies that exist in the story regarding the subject of spirituality as a source of treatment for physical diseases, termed as 'voices' in theoretical terms, are discerned to locate the existing consciousness or worldviews. Finally, as every individual inhabiting a social space appropriates certain ideologies and reject certain worldviews, the protagonist's appropriation of an ideology will also be examined in this research.

The empirical literature available on *Zaabalawi* is not in tremendous amount. The few articles accessible are related to the themes of existentialism and spirituality. For instance in the article "Patients and healers in *Zaabalawi* by Naguib Mahfouz and a Strangeness In My Mind by Orhan Pamuk" the authors throw light upon the journey of main characters towards spiritual healing (Tekin and Kugu, 2017). The researchers suggest that the protagonist's search for a remedy through non-scientific ways reflect the issue of spiritual healing (Tekin and Kugu, 2017). The unknown disease which cannot be treated through medicine is a metaphor used for representing erosion of spiritual values (Tekin and Kugu, 2017). Likewise, in "The Pursuit of Existential Meaning and Social Justice in Naguib Mahfouz's Three Short Stories: "*Zaabalawi*", "A Day for Saying Goodbye", and "The Answer is No" the theme of hope for finding a meaningful life in "*Zaabalawi*" is discussed (Sutanto et al, 2017). Similarly, "Analytical Study: The Existential Predicament Perspective in Naguib Mahfouz's Selected Novels" highlights the existential crisis of man depicting despair, frustration and poverty in the selected novels of Naguib Mahfouz (Naem and Janoory, 2019). However, the short story is not explored through the lens of Dialogism therefore; this research implies Bakhtin's approach for analyzing "*Zaabalawi*".

Research Methodology

This research employs Alan McKee's (2002) model of textual analysis which defines the status of text as "something we make meaning from" (McKee, 2003, p. 9). McKee's method of textual analyses suggests an informed and educated reading of a text to carry out the most appropriate and logical interpretation of the text (McKee, 2003, p.9). The interpretation is made on the basis of most logical and rational evidences. Such interpretation of the text is most appropriate for this research, as it deals with the text at ideological level and does not take into consideration the composition, structure, or narration of the story. In addition, this research undertaking contextual factors for the interpretation of the text which is suggested by the model proposed by McKee

(2002). McKee suggests that interpretation of a text is based on its context and the context can become the reason for the multiple and no absolute interpretation of a text.

The model works in three steps, in the first step, the objective of the research is narrowed down to allow a focused interpretation of the text. In the second step, the contextual features of the text are analyzed to fact in the context based events to derive the most appropriate interpretations. In the last step, the themes or the ideologies of the text are analyzed. This research follows the model by first delimiting the focus of research to the protagonist's dialogic interactions in the story. Then it takes into consideration the mystic and religious elements of the text to discern the religious context in which spiritual healing is preferred by majority. And at the third step, it examines the dialogic interaction among characters in detail to unpack their ideological beliefs.

Textual Analysis

Dialogic Interaction at Social Level: Protagonist in Dialogue with the Society's Voice:

The protagonist's internalization of the ideological perception of spiritual healing as a more effective treatment for physical ailments than medication is influenced by his dialogic interaction with the society in the story. This religious ideological worldview regarding spiritual healing as the ultimate cure to physical ailments stems out of the religious and socio-cultural context in which he has grown as an individual.

This interaction begins from his early childhood, as in the beginning of the story, he recalls a memory of his childhood's most popular song through which he heard about Sheikh Zaabalawi for the first time. A verse of the song quoted in the story is as follows:

Oh what's become of the world, Zaabalawi?

They've turned it upside down and taken away its taste. (Mahfouz, 1961, p. 1)

The song is a wailing invocation to the saint Zaabalawi about the world's terrible plight in his absence. The verses indicate that Zaabalawi is perceived as a person with the knowledge to resolve worldly troubles and bring harmony to people's lives. Thus, in Zaabalawi's absence, the world appears to be unpleasant and out of order which suggests his grandeur. The popularity of the song celebrating Zaabalawi as a mighty saint indicates the society's general endorsement of his benign abilities. In theoretical terms, it indicates the ideological worldview held by the majority at societal level which is communicated and reiterated through language in the form of a song. The protagonist of the story is engaged in dialogue with this socio-religious ideology throughout his childhood to adolescence. This ideology is reaffirmed repeatedly in the form of a multitude of voices at several stages in his life. The underlying worldview discerned in the verses of this popular song suggest a widespread acceptance of spirituality as a preferred and effective source of healing for physical ailments. Popularity of the song also suggests that the majority of society's ideologies are influenced by religion. The protagonist of the story adapts the social ideology based on Muslim religion regarding spirituality as a source of healing. His assimilation with the dominant socio-religious ideology is indicative of the dialogic event between the society and individuals at

ideological level. The verse quoted above is exemplary of the philosophical nature of language which allows communication among characters at an ideological level. The dialogue, in this sense, carries certain worldviews that it represents and intends to communicate.

Dialogic Interaction among Characters: Protagonist in Dialogue with Characters' Voice:

The story begins with the protagonist recalling a memory of his childhood conversation with his father. He recalls that the childhood songs about Zaabalawi sparked his interest in learning more about Zaabalawi. Out of curiosity, one day the protagonist asked his father about Zaabalawi, "Who was Zaabalawi?" (Mahfouz, 1961, p.1). In response, his father felt surprised at his son's inability to comprehend the most renowned saint of their time. His father responded with great respect,

"May his blessing descend upon you, he's a true saint of God, a remover of worries and troubles. Were it not for him I would have died miserably" In the years that followed, I heard my father many a time sing the praises of this good saint and speak of the miracles he performed. (p.1)

The father's response reflects his deep affection and regard for the great saint Zaabalawi. The father considers Zaabalawi to be his life's saviour, having cured him of a severe ailment and saved him from death. He also sees him as a true saint of God, with unrivalled spiritual knowledge and healing abilities. Zaabalawi is introduced by protagonist's father as a great saint of God known for his grandeur and healing abilities, and his devotees who seek his blessings to improve their lives.

This response represents the ideological belief held by the protagonist's father which validates Zaabalawi's existence as a saintly figure. The father's response acts as a testimony to Zaabalawi's greatness. This perception adds credibility to Zaabalawi's potential for healing physical diseases through the use of his grand spiritual knowledge. The interaction between the father and the son occurs at ideological level in which the father's ideological beliefs are communicated to his son through the ideological nature of language. The protagonist, later on, comes in dialogue with his father's statement about Zaabalawi as he suffers from an incurable fatal disease. He comprehends, assimilates with and adapts his father's religious ideology about Zaabalawi's potential to heal physical ailments, "I remembered by chance what I had heard in my childhood: Why, I asked myself, should I not seek out Sheikh Zaabalawi?" (1) At this stage, the interaction between the father and the son can be termed as a dialogic interaction in which the father's consciousness represented through his statement in the form of his 'voice' blends with the protagonist's consciousness. As a result of this dialogic interaction, the protagonist sets off on a quest for the spiritual healer Sheikh Zaabalawi in hopes of getting his disease cured.

On his quest for Sheikh Zaabalawi, the protagonist first encounters Sheikh Qamar who is a reputable lawyer in religious court. Upon the protagonist's inquiry about Sheikh Zaabalawi, "Was he really a saint?" Sheikh Qamar responds, "We used to regard him as a man of miracles." (2) Sheikh Qamar's affirmative statement on Zaabalawi's credibility as a religious saint acts as a 'voice' in the multitude of voices on the Subject of Zaabalawi. His voice expressing his ideological

beliefs affirmed Sheikh Zaabalawi's status and also validated his majestic potential as a spiritual healer.

The protagonist encounters a common man who was a seller of books on mysticism and theology. He inquires the bookseller's about Zaabalawi, to which he responds in amazement, "Zaabalawi! Good heavens, what a time ago that was! Certainly he used to live in this house when it was habitable. Many were the times he would sit with me talking of bygone days, and I would be blessed by his holy presence. Where, though, is Zaabalawi today?" (3) The bookseller's ideology regarding Sheikh Zaabalawi further affirmed the social ideology which regarded him as a spiritual saint capable of healing physical ailments. As the bookseller refers to his company as 'holy presence', it suggests the admiration and respect for his spiritual inspiration.

During his quest, the protagonist encounters numerous other people and makes similar inquiries. In response to his inquiries, numerous voices emerge reflecting contrasting ideologies on Zaabalawi's credibility as a spiritual healer. As the protagonist states:

I found that a large number of them had never even heard of Zaabalawi, some, though recalling nostalgically the pleasant times they had spent with him, were ignorant of his present whereabouts, while others openly made fun of him, labeled him a charlatan, and advised me to put myself in the hands of a doctor-as though I had not already done so.
(p.4)

These responses reflect the worldviews or the consciousness of the people which can be discerned as a multitude of voices representing unmergeable ideologies. The contradictory voices can be discerned as the ones that negate Zaabalawi's credibility as a spiritual healer and advocate medical treatment for physical ailments. Whereas, the affirmative voices can be discerned as those confirming the effectiveness of spiritual healing over medical treatments. The protagonist is engaged in a dialogue with the multitude of voices, however, he adapts on the affirmative ideologies as he can assimilate with them more reasonably.

The protagonist's meeting with the head of the town further encourages him to continue his quest for Zaabalawi. The head provides assistance to the protagonist and suggests him to go about his quest systematically using a region map or a guide. He also suggests him to, "Look carefully in the cafes, the places where the dervishes perform their rites, the mosques and prayer-rooms, and the Green Gate, for he may well be concealed among the beggars and be indistinguishable from them." (p.5) This suggestion implicitly affirms Zaabalawi's saintly figure as his personality is conceived as those of truly humble and great saints.

The protagonist's dialogic interaction with a religious calligraphist Old Hassanein adds further credibility to the protagonist's ideology regarding Zaabalawi. The calligraphist expresses astonishment at Zaabalawi's name and responds, "Zaabalawi! God be praised! ... "He's alive, without a doubt He had impeccable taste, and it was due to him that I made my most beautiful drawings." (p.5) The protagonist expresses his desire to meet Zaabalawi for the cure of his diseases as, "God knows how dire my need for him is, and no one knows better than you of the ailments in

respect to which he is sought." To which the calligraphist affirms the protagonist's ideology by saying, "Yes, yes. May God restore you to health" (p.6). The dialogic interaction between the two further validated the protagonist's quest for spiritual healing instead of medical treatments.

The protagonist's dialogic interaction with the well-known composer Sheikh Gad lead him to keep his hopes high and not fall in despair as he suggests, "Do not give in to defeat. This extraordinary man brings fatigue to all who seek him." (p.7) Sheikh's worldview about the ever-elusive nature of Zaabalawi is explained as, "Such are saints or they would not be saints," (p.7). The protagonist's inquisition, "Do those who need him suffer as I do?" makes the Sheikh respond, "Such suffering is part of the cure!" (p.7) The ideology underlying the Sheikh's voice reflects the effectiveness and grandeur of Zaabalawi's healing potentials and regard him as an extraordinary spiritual being. However, Zaabalawi's methods of healing are unrevealed as the Sheikh points in response to the protagonist's question, "How was it that he cured those diseases before which men are powerless?"; "That is his secret. Maybe you will learn it when you meet him." (p.8)

Conclusion

The dialogic interaction of the protagonist with the various characters in the story reflect a multitude of voices that are 'unmergeable' in nature. These voices are indicative of the underlying ideologies regarding the credibility of Sheikh Zaabalawi as a spiritual healer. The protagonist engages in a dialogue with each of the various voices at an ideological level. However, as humanly possible, he comprehends the ideologies reflected in the each of those voices to discern the ones he can assimilate well with based on his socio-cultural and religious worldview. His dialogic interaction with his father proves pivotal in shaping his worldview. The blending of consciousness at ideological level occurs between the affirmative voices and the father's voice. Therefore, as evident, it can be concluded that the protagonist's internalization of the ideological perception of spiritual healing as a more effective treatment for physical ailments than medication is purely an outcome of his dialogic interaction with the society.

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