

Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading

Researcher : Salma Abdul Hussein

Dept. of English , College of Arts , University of Basrah

Prof. Dr. Jinan F. B. Al- Hajaj

Dep. of English, Collage of Education for Human Sciences, University of Basrah

Abstract:

Crucial contributions have been made to major areas of literature generally and novel specifically by the Russian scholar and thinker Mikhail Bakhtin. Polyphony and dialogism are among many fundamental concepts that Bakhtin has examined and analyzed through his study of and writings on Dostoevsky's works of art. Bakhtin in his book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, considers Dostoevsky as the founder and the creator of the polyphonic novel, a novelistic genre that differs fundamentally from the monologic novel. In the current study the focus will be on the most salient features of the polyphonic novel, i.e., the concepts of polyphony and dialogism will be traced and analyzed in *Gods Without Men*, a contemporary novel by Hari Kunzru. These two concepts are interrelated and their coexistence in any text can categorize the text as **polyphonic**.

Key Words: Bakhtin, polyphony, dialogism, Hari Kunzru, *Gods Without Men* .

الطبيعة البوليفونية لرواية

آلهة بدون رجال للروائي هاري كنزرو

الباحثة: سلمى عبد الحسين داود

جامعة البصرة - كلية الآداب - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

أ.د. جنان فضل بريتو

جامعة البصرة - كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

ملخص البحث:

باختين هو أحد أهم مفكري القرن العشرين ومن أهم افكاره وكتابات كانت عن الروائي الروسي ديستوفسكي واعماله الروائية . باختين اعتبر ديستوفسكي هو من قدم الرواية البوليفونية او الرواية متعددة الاصوات بشكلها المثالي ومن هذا المنطلق وفي محاولة لتطبيق الاسس التي ارساها باختين حول كتابات فيودور ديستوفسكي على احدى الروايات الحديثة والبحث عن الطبيعة البوليفونية للرواية الحديثة . ان رواية (آلهة بدون رجال) ، هي رواية حديثة كتبها الروائي الانكليزي من اصول هندية هاري كنزرو ، وفي محاولة لتحليل هذه الرواية الحديثة التي كتبت في العام ٢٠١١ نجد انها ذات طبيعة بوليفونية وذلك لوجود عدد كبير من الشخصيات في داخل الرواية وكل شخصية هي شخصية قائمة بحد ذاتها ولها ايدولوجيتها الخاصة وفكرها المستقل بعيدا عن ايدولوجية وفكر كاتب الرواية . ان رواية بالهة بدون رجال تقدم نظره بوليفونية اي متعددة الاتجاهات والاصوات وهناك الكثير من الوقائع المجتمعية والتاريخية التي اشار اليها كنزرو في روايته ولم يكتف بتلك الاشارات التاريخية بل ناقش مسألة الصحن الطائرة والاساطير التي نسجت حولها وتأثر شريحة من المجتمع الامريكي بها . ان البحث المقدم عن هذه الرواية والذي يتعلق بتعددية الاصوات في الرواية حيث ان الكاتب قدم شخصيات حقيقية مستقلة وليست دمي تتحرك بارادة الكاتب مثلما هي عليه الروايات احادية الاصوات المثلثة بروايات القرن التاسع عشر وما سبقه.

Introduction

Bakhtin states that among the many literary genres, the novel is the only one constantly developing (*The Dialogic Imagination* 4). This unfixed genre and its continuous evolution invite studies and investigations to catch up with its changeable nature. The contemporary novel is far more sophisticated than the traditional novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which Bakhtin labels as monologic to differentiate it from the polyphonic novel. The polyphonic and dialogic nature of the novel is expected to be a major characteristic of the contemporary novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bakhtin has built his analytical apparatus on the works of Dostoevsky and considered them as the ideal examples of the polyphonic novel. In the light of Bakhtinian thoughts and ideas on polyphony and dialogism, the current study will apply these concepts to a contemporary novel of the twenty-first century, namely, Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* (2012) in an attempt to prove that Kunzru's novel is polyphonic and dialogic in its own way.

Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading

In the present study, a contemporary novel is explored from a Bakhtinian perspective so that light would be shed on any signs of the ongoing evolution of the novel as a genre. Furthermore, the study aims to show how the complexities of contemporary life have cast their shadows on the twenty-first century realities and the impacts and influences of those complexities on individuals in general and literature in particular. Kunzru's *Gods without Men* is a good example of the contemporary novel as it touches upon many critical and controversial issues that humanity has constancy deal with now and which the study embarks on uncovering and evaluating. Also and more importantly in this study, *Gods Without Men* is read as a polyphonic novel so as to investigate the presence of the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and dialogism .

Polyphony and Dialogism

In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's fiction as highly innovative and names Dostoevsky as "the creator of the polyphonic novel," which is a "fundamentally new novelistic genre" (7). Bakhtin defines the polyphonic novel as one that invests in a "plurality of voices" which are "independent and unmerged". Because these voices belong to different characters, they manifest a plurality of consciousnesses as well. Bakhtin opines that all the characters in Dostoevsky's fiction have the independence and freedom as well as the right to speak and tell their own tales in their own words (*Problems* 6). As such, Bakhtin opts for "polyphony", a term he borrows from music, to indicate the multiplicity of voices that characters and narrators are given in Dostoevsky's narrative worlds. For Bakhtin, the musical term is the perfect choice to reflect the multi-voicedness which Dostoevsky adeptly creates. After introducing the term "polyphony", Bakhtin goes on to acknowledge that Dostoevsky's fiction is basically dialogic in opposition to monologic, the form in which the majority of European fiction was cast. Bakhtin soon adds that Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is by no means ordinarily dialogic as it possesses "a dialogicality of the ultimate whole" (*Problems* 18).

For Bakhtin, in the world of the polyphonic novel, the characters are free subjects and their consciousnesses unfold independently. Further, the main character's consciousness does not necessarily dominate the story world and his/her voice is by no means the mouthpiece of the author as it is in the monologic novel. More specifically, the heroes in a monologic narrative are unable to tell their own stories on their own. Such heroes are trapped in a world of a single consciousness, unlike the multi-consciousness world of the polyphonic novel (*Problems* xxii). The polyphonic narration is profoundly personalized because every thought is recognized as "the position of a personality" (*Problems* 9). Consequently, the originality of a polyphonic novel springs from its writer's ability to "visualize" and depict someone else's personality without the author's authorial mediation and at the same time without "reducing it to a materialized psychic reality" (*Problems* 12-13). The

*Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's
Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading*

polyphonic world as it unfolds in polyphonic fiction represents a cross section of life in all its complications, while a character's consciousness is not introduced "on the path of its own evolution and growth, that is, not historically, but rather alongside other consciousnesses" (*Problems* 32). Accordingly, the consciousness of fictional characters are not presented in isolation and no individual character progresses on his/her own; rather the interaction among these different consciousness within their independent worlds is what the polyphonic novel simulates (*Problems* 36).

In the world of the polyphonic and dialogic narrative, contradictory elements are presented parallel to each other, as though they existed in a specific point of time. Characters are reacting dialectically to each other as they stand "alongside or opposite one another" without "merging". They maintain their contradictions, yet "an eternal harmony of unmerged voices" is created, leading to "their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel" (*Problems* 30).

One of the interesting features of the polyphonic novel is the embodiment of the idea in an image. In the polyphonic structure of the novel, the idea –prototypes are converted into idea-images. To achieve the conversion of the idea, two conditions are required. The first is to combine it with the image of the characters (*Problems* 84). Each character represents an idea which is itself based on that character's personality (*Problems* 86). As such, the hero in the polyphonic novel is an ideologist and, as such, his personality unites with his worldview, so that "the image of an idea is separable from the image of a person, the carrier of that idea" (*Problems* 85). Bakhtin asserts that "the truth about the world is inseparable from the truth of the personality" (*Problems* 78). Since the author in the polyphonic novel is distanced from the process, such an author is "neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology" (*Problems* 85). Bakhtin adds that the idea occurs as someone else's, "preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea" (*Problems* 85). The second condition for the idea to materialize into an image is the dialogic nature of the idea. Bakhtin explains that the idea may die if it remains trapped inside a person's isolated consciousness, whereas it lives, progresses and grows strong when it enters into a dialogic relation with other ideas. Thus, this living idea will ultimately acquire a linguistic expression and is reinvented, contributing to the creation of new ideas (*Problems* 87-88). Bakhtin locates the idea "not in individual consciousness", but in the "dialogic communion" among different individuals's consciousnesses (*Problems* 88). This ideational interaction will be a shaping force in the "great dialogue" which the polyphonic novel creates. A polyphonic novel gives voice to a multitude of consciousnesses, therefore, no single judging "I" dominates the narrative world; rather readers have to navigate through a novel that shelters numerous "I's" and the interrelationship of the "I" of each speaking/ thinking character (*Problems* 100).

Gods without Men: an Overview

The novel under study, *Gods Without Men*, grew out of its author's endeavor to understand and come to terms with the mobile (if not indeed the global or even multiple) nature of his own identity. Kunzru explains in an interview he gave upon the publication of *Gods without Men* that the germ of the book was conceived while he was in a library in New York City, reading about sixteenth century India. However, this search of his led him to place his next story not in India (where his parents originally come from), but in the United States, where he was living then. Yet, Kunzru neither claims that he wrote an American novel nor that his book has the characteristics of the American national ethos. According to Llena Zamorano, Kunzru has touched upon many issues such as globalization in his early works. Therefore, *Gods without Men* can be considered as another "notable contribution to the reconceptualization of the American novel and of the American literary history in the current context of globalization and transnational exchanges" (2). Nonetheless, Kunzru prioritizes the national over the global in his *Gods Without Men* as he opts for an American national context. Zamorano also thinks that Kunzru's novel is a significant representation of the change that occurs in national narratives. This change has been inaugurated by recent research on the American National novel and its transformation over the years (2). On another note and in his analysis of the contemporary American novel, Richard Gary recognizes that the American fiction and in particular from the late 1980s on, was advanced and introduced by migrant writers. These novelists and their cultural backgrounds have big influence on the American novel because they are the result of the cultural diversity and blending fostered by globalization.

Even though half British and half Indian, Hari Kunzru tries to mirror contemporary American reality mixed with stories from different times and eras. Kunzru himself seems to have combatted and rejected his mixed cultural and religious heritage in favor of more secular and personal ethos. In his article "Hacking the society of Control: The Fiction of Hari Kunzru", Peter D. Mathews wrote that Hari Kunzru's "lack of faith, over the years, formed itself into an active ethical position". To probe into this issue, Kunzru chooses the desert of Mojave in California where a rock formation of three Pinnacles stands tall, to be the main location of the events of his multilayered story. Kunzru has very well-researched Native American heritage and mythology and therefore he pays homage to Native American people by asserting the significance of the Pinnacles as a sacred place for them. Peter Childs stated that *Gods without Men* is a novel that touches upon several traditional and modern American Mythical systems relevant to religion reveries in the desert of Mojave, historical references, drug fantasies, rock stars, tricksters and extraterrestrial beliefs (Hari Kunzru 532). Kunzru successfully connects all these disparate sources and casts them into a series of echoes and rhymes. Kunzru further pushes temporal

boundaries to the very edge, making sure that the events do not have to be connected chronologically. The story jumps from one temporal zone to another while the spatial coordinate, which is the Desert of Mojave and specifically the three Pinnacles, ties up the various timelines.

Kunzru weaves the timeless and occasionally magical threads of his stories with Native American mythology. For instance, the prologue with which he starts *God without Men* pivots on the Myth of Coyote, the sacred figure in the mythology of the Native Americans. This brief undated episode entitled "In the time when the animals were Men" orients itself towards Kunzru's plan to create a magical realistic narrative. But this terse overture comes across as untrue in view of the fact that the figure of the Coyote never fails to appear and reappear in the novel. Kunzru's novel spans different historical periods and the chapters which are carefully dated go back and forth in time. The story line takes place in the present time between 2008 and 2009 and is mainly about a couple from New York, Jaz Matharu an Indian immigrant and his American wife Liza with their four-year-old Raj who is diagnosed with severe autism. The family is facing a crisis due to the condition of their son and their marriage is at risk in consequence. The couple go on a healing vacation to the Pinnacles in the hope that they can save their marriage. The mysterious loss of their son Raj while they were sightseeing around the Pinnacles sets the action going. The narrative includes several other characters which are all connected via the Pinnacles. Going back in history, the novel references the nineteenth century Mormons who were searching for the quicksilver near the Mojave desert. The book also contains episodes that date back to the 18th century or even earlier such as the Spanish monk Francisco Gracés, an emissary who landed in America in 1775 and kept a record of his thoughts and travels. In all, the novel hinges on temporal, religious, and ethnic multiplicity which one single place, namely the Mojave desert, shelters. Therefore, the study of polyphony and dialogism in *Gods Without Men* is expected to unravel some of the mysteries of the narrative.

Polyphony and dialogism in *Gods without Men*

Kunzru's *Gods without Men* is investigated to see whether it is a polyphonic or monologic novel. Additionally, the analysis aims to identify and uncover the way polyphony operates in the novel and the modes in which it emerges. A close reading of the book reveals that it is polyphonic and dialogic on three levels. The first is embodied in the multiplicity of autonomous voices that are heard in the novel. The second level relates to the way in which the hero in the novel is constructed and which makes him display not one single consciousness but several ones. The third has to do with the cultural, historical, social and ideological plurality that the novel seems to host and express. In the sections below, these three levels are explored with examples to illustrate the characteristics of each.

Kunzru endeavors to link his characters one way or another so that each new character or hero introduced would soon fall into place with either antecedent or subsequent characters. For instance, in a chapter dated at 1958, a woman named Joanie lost her daughter Judy in the Mojave desert the same way Jaz and Lisa would lose Raj fifty years later. So intrigued by extraterrestrial worlds, Joanie travelled to the Mojave dragging along her daughter to take part in some galactic event near the three Pinnacles. Joanie's mind teams with unanswered questions about the universe and the galaxy and she arrives in the desert seeking answers. A disciple of Ashtar Galactic Command, Joanie recalls with pleasure and pride how she knew about the cult as she makes her way through the crowd of the cohorts following the guide. The events end in this chapter with Joanie losing her daughter Judy in a very strange way and Judy would remain missing for the next eleven years before she turns up mysteriously as a young woman. When the reader meets Joanie next, it is in a chapter dated at 1969 where Joanie no longer owns the narrative voice. A teenager character named Dawn who would be the owner of the seedy motel in which Jaz and Lisa stayed in 2008 takes over to tell about her encounter with Joanie who was then called "crazy" by the locals. Working after school with her uncle's Ray's shop, Dawn tells about this crazy lady who lives near the Pinnacles and buys supplies from Ray's store. Dawn will join the Ashtar cult soon and live wildly for few years before she comes to term with herself and her past. Settling back near the Pinnacles and opening her own motel, Dawn would run into Judy again. The two of them would get mixed up with Lisa in a series of unexplained events which culminate in the disappearance of Raj. This is how the many threads of the story come together to create a web of encounters, coincidences and contacts. And this is how polyphony is achieved on numerous levels giving the narrative its multifaceted nature and plurality of history, culture and ideology.

The Multiplicity of Voices and Dialogism in *Gods Without Men*

As a polyphonic feature, the multiplicity of characters' voices contributes directly to the dialogic nature of the novel. Sue Vice in her book *Introducing Bakhtin*, observes that polyphony is precisely embodied in "the construction of voices" that belong to characters along with the narrator(s) in the novel. This observation of hers is based on Bakhtin's argument that in the polyphonic world, characters and narrator(s) can be recognized by their distinct voices and this relatively myriad of consciousness determines whether the novel is polyphonic or not (112). The characters and narrator have their own worlds and thoughts and therefore, each one has the right to express these thoughts and ideas independently and even autonomously. This is why, Vice seconds Bakhtin's understanding of the polyphonic novel as "a democratic" platform that centralizes the "equality of utterance" (112). At the same time the dialogic nature of the polyphonic novel is partially manifested in the voices of characters in the novel; the arrangement of these voices and the inner consciousnesses are revealed in

*Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's
Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading*

consequence. When these voices are heard as in the polyphonic novel, they interact with and even combat each other dialogically (*Problems* 18). The dialogic nature of the polyphonic novel creates such an inner connection between these various voices and eventually leads to the production of multiple ideas and opinions (*Problems* 90).

As it is mentioned above, Kunzru's *Gods without Men* displays several of the qualities that are unmistakably polyphonic such as the multiplicity of voices, plurality of consciousnesses, the narrative diversity in addition to the miscellany of the cultural, social, historical, ethnic, and ideological references. The book comprises several storylines surrounding the main plot that binds together many subplots. These various fictional lines are furnished with characters that function individually and collectively. In either case, each character possesses its own voice which allows its inner consciousness to unfold. For instance, characters in *Gods without Men* have different geographical, cultural, ethnic and historical backgrounds. Yet these various individuals are linked by virtue of the Mojave and its three-Pinnacle landmark. This remote desert plays a chief role in the unity of the novel and operates as a crossroads at which people cross paths with each other. All the characters of the novel find themselves in the vicinity of the Pinnacles while they are seeking a truth of one sort or another. Kunzru keeps this pursuit of the truth open-ended as it evades any attempt to finalize it and this atmosphere of unfinished business is one of the main hallmarks of the polyphonic novel. Finding the truth of the Universe was what occupies the minds of many characters in the novel like Joanie who pursued galactic knowledge, Deighton who conducted anthropological studies and also the ex-engineer Schmidt who moved to the desert to send messages to the other worlds. Also the main characters in the novel Jaz and his wife Liza find themselves connected to the desert after they lose their autistic son Raj there and when they find him, he is changed and his autistic condition has considerably improved, thanks to mysterious influence of the Pinnacles. And when Raj starts to behave like a normal child, his father Jaz becomes obsessed with finding the truth about what happened to his son. Jaz goes back to the Pinnacles to find answers for his questions, but Kunzru never provides any ready answers as he keeps things open-ended and dangling.

According to Bakhtin, in a polyphonic novel, characters are not treated as objects, but as subjects on their own with thoughts and worlds that do not necessarily copy the author's. Their interaction with each other is what gives the polyphonic novel its significance. Llena Zamorano points to how Kunzru's very sophisticated style has successfully reflected the cultural mixture that dominates the modern life in general and life in America in specific. Kunzru's novel showcases such consequences of this mixture as the cultural clash that can be observed when differences between cultures with respect to religion or faith, for instance, lead to misunderstandings (Zamorano 7). In *Gods Without Men*, this cultural clash is portrayed in Jaz and Liza, a couple from New York City whose marriage faces problems due to their totally different cultures. While Jaz comes from a Sikh Indian origin, Liza is a white American from a Jewish family. Their different backgrounds cause conflicts that

make their relationship collapse in the face of troubles. The conflict between the two has a dialogic dimension to it and is manifested in their conversations that uncover their attitudes towards each other. Kunzru allows readers to learn about Jaz and Liza through their language and as such Kunzru activates dialogism and ultimately polyphony. In the same line, each character expresses his/ her inner thoughts, beliefs and expectations independently of the author. Thereupon, Jaz who belongs to an Indian family from the Punjab struggles to break free from his native culture in which the son must obey his elders almost blindly. And even as a man of sophisticated education, it is yet too difficult for him to renounce the traditions and myths of his parents' culture. On the other hand, Liza is an American Jewish woman who, as cited by the narrator, "would talk about feeling rootless. She was an only child. As soon as she left home, her parents severed all ties with the long Island suburb where she has grown and moved to Arizona" (*Gods Without Men* 85). Her rootlessness is self-professed, rather than a conclusion the narrator draws. As a result of her upbringing, Liza has more liberal thoughts and she seems to embody the ideal modern American woman who wants to live according to her own rules. When Jaz and Liza decided to get married, Jaz knew that his parents would not welcome this relationship easily and "he felt like a condemned man on his way to chair" (*Gods Without Men* 88). This is how Jaz felt and expressed himself when he and Liza planned to meet Jaz's parents for the first time. Jaz's parents behaved politely, but very coldly and Jaz's mother in particular "responded with a sort of icy neutrality." Jaz tried to convince Liza that his parents did not reject her personally and explained that it is their nature as conservative Indian migrants. Jaz's polyphonic explanation makes him speak on behalf of not only his parents, but the entire Indian American community:

"The same with lot of Indians," "It wasn't "It's not you ," he told her "you understand that, don't you? They'd be like that with anyone." "Anyone white." (GWM 89)

In this polyphonic exchange of husband and wife, Jaz gives voice to his absent parents, explaining their cold attitude in a desperate attempt to cushion its effect on Liza. Jaz's response proves the tension between not only the two main voices in the book, but also Jaz's parents whose resentment at this biracial union is too strong to hide. The clash between the Indian and the American sides of their family makes of Jaz an unwilling mediator.

The misunderstanding caused by cultural differences is expressed more strongly in another situation that involves Raj who is the outcome of the bicultural and biracial marriage. Jaz's mother sent a locket that has some religious value to her autistic grandson Raj, thinking that it is going to help heal him or at least protect him. While Jaz was sceptic and reluctant, Raj liked the locket and refused to let go of it. Unsurprisingly, when Liza saw the locket around her son's neck, she was furious to see "That piece of crap round his neck". Jaz has to be again apologetic and to play the role of a go-between to defuse the conflict:

*Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's
Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading*

“Damn it, Jaz, I thought I’d made it clear, I don’t want your mom’s superstitious bullshit anywhere near our son.”(94)

Liza refuses any gestures of kindness on the part of Jaz’s family and she justified her refusal by reminding Jaz of their treatment of her because she is a white woman. The white Liza is on the attack while the brown Jaz is on the defensive and Kunzru allows the conflict to build without intervention, siding with no one. His characters’ consciousnesses unfold and their thoughts flow freely in an environment where the notion of right and wrong is irrelevant. Both characters reveal their personalities very independently, but each stands for an entire culture and therefore instead of two distinct voices, the readers hear a multitude of voices. This world of the polyphony that readers find themselves in its midst is made of various and opposite points of view. The voices of the characters and their inner consciousnesses are heard rather than described.

This cultural divide shapes as well another story that goes hand in hand with the story of Jaz and Liza. This episode also takes place in 2008 and its hero is a famous British rock star named Nicky Capaldi . He moved with his band to America to promote his music. However, he and his band were making no progress due to his excessive drinking and drug use. His move to America cost him his girlfriend Anouk who chose to leave for Paris on a modeling job. Their phone call which also takes place in the middle of Mojave Desert reveals each character’s personality and priorities. Anouk is more pragmatic and grounded while Nicky is very fragile, dreamy and lost. Nicky who was then high on drugs and very drunk begs Anouk to leave her modeling job and fly to L.A. to be with him. His speculative “you” utterances on behalf of Anouk are polyphonic rather than monologic. Likewise, Anouk’s replies to Nicky’s entreaties are polyphonic as they combine her consciousness with Nicky’s, unmasking his true motives. The reader does not hear two voices of two main characters in this episode, but four in total as each character attempts to imagine how the other would react and what s/he would say in reaction:

“Come, I want you to come. Just get on a plane. I’ll meet you at airport. I love you.”

“Why now, Nicky? Why are you saying all this now?”

“Because it’s true.”

“You’re only saying it because you’re afraid. You think You’re going to lose me, so you say these dramatic things.”

“,,,,,,,”

“Anouk, I am serious. If you don’t come, I tell you I’ll do something stupid.”

“You always doing stupid things, Nicky. You’re a rock star. You get to do stupid things”

“I’ll kill myself.”

“No you won’t.”

“I will I’ve got a gun.”

“You’re full of shit, Nicky. I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait. You think I’m full of shit? Listen.” (GWM 32)

In the above exchange, Nicky and Anouk weave hypothetical scenarios about each other. While Nicky’s ramblings are alcohol and/or drug-induced and consequently delusional, Anouk’s speculations are clear-minded and pragmatic being based on her sound and thorough knowledge of her partner. Nicky and Anouk are given autonomy so that their fears, wishes and conflicts are fully expressed. Whether as narrator or author, Kunzru does not interfere to justify their behavior or pass judgment on any of them.

The Multiple Voices of the Hero in *Gods Without Men*

One of the fundamental characteristics of the polyphonic novel is the way the hero is constructed. According to Bakhtin, the hero in polyphonic fiction is not an ordinary character; the hero has certain qualities which make up his/ her image. Such heroes possess a “particular point of view” towards their surroundings and themselves. Thanks to their particular viewpoints, they are qualified to evaluate their own selves and the realities in which they exist. Consequently, what is significant to the construction of the polyphonic heroes is not how they will be seen by the world, but rather in what manner and shape the world appears to them and how they evaluate themselves in respect of the world (*Problems* 47). According to Bakhtin, a polyphonic character “is a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words” (*The Bakhtin Reader* 93). The outcome of such a treatment of characters is that the writer’s “design for a character is a design for discourse” and the writer’s “discourse about a character is discourse about discourse.” Consequently, in the polyphonic novel the author is not speaking about the hero, but with the hero; the hero is not (he) or (I), but rather a (thou, (you)) which is another autonomous (I) (*The Bakhtin Reader* 94, 93).

In *Gods Without Men*, Kunzru’s main character is in fact Jaz whose personality is weighed down by the gap between his Indian background and the American culture where he has lived all his life. He could not altogether deny the influence of his Indian upbringing or ignore cultural boundaries. The only aspects of his personality with which he seems most comfortable are his scientific training and professional skills which have so far secured his success in a big financial company, the Wall

Street Firm. Jaz is a man who believes that the world is fundamentally rational because people in America, as Kunzru's himself points out, have been entirely secularized by their experience there (Mathews 3). Jaz seems to be doing what Bakhtin has noted about a Dostoevsky's hero who monitors all the ideas and words that the others say to and about him (*Problems* 53). In *Gods Without Men*, Jaz is highly conscious toward his son's condition and combats the feeling of guilt not only because he leaves the boy entirely in the care of his wife Liza while he earns the family their living, but because he is aware of his feeling that his son is the one thing that ruins the picture perfect of his world:

Every weekday morning for four years Jaz had felt guilty. Guilty as he closed the front door and headed for the subway, guilty as he bought his Times at the newsstand; it was always such a relief to be away from Raj's relentless tantrums. Liza had a shitty deal and he knew she knew he knew, and that was the hairline crack in the bowl, and the start of their trouble (GWM 48).

Jaz thinks that his autistic son is the source of all his marriage problems; inwardly he wishes that Raj never existed reflecting that "Before Raj came along they'd been fine. A terrible thing for a father to think about his son, but it was true" (GWM 56). Jaz is tormented by his self-consciousness and very wary of other people's being conscious of him as a bad parent. Jaz reports his feeling of shame and insecurity when he has to handle Raj on his own and in the presence of strangers:

The man [a stranger] watched them [Jaz and Raj] struggle. Jaz tried not to feel embarrassed. He'd never got used to this part of being Raj's dad: the scenes, the way they were always the center of attention. They could never blend in, be a normal family (GWM 56).

On a different note, Nicky the British rock star moved to America with his band to record songs and make music. When he failed because of alcohol and drugs, Nicky drove to the Pinnacles in the middle of the desert. He was depressed and feeling lost after the American dream for which he left his girlfriend collapses. His professional fiasco is contrasted to his girlfriend's success in getting a job in the Paris fashion week. As a result, his self-consciousness of his failure heightens and he starts to search for ways to turn the attention from it to something else. Getting lost in the desert and making everyone worry about his whereabouts seem to him like a good start:

No one knew where he was. no one in the world. But then again wasn't that point of coming out to desert? you had to get lost to find yourself which sounded like the sort of things Noah would say. Fucking Noah, it was all his fault (GWM 30).

*Polyphony and Dialogism in Hari Kunzru's
Gods Without Men: a Bakhtinian Reading*

Like Jaz, Nicky is obsessed with what other people have to think and say about him. He is almost comforted by the notion of being lost only to find himself rise as a new Noah. Nicky is unable to admit defeat and let go of his dreams of huge professional success. The orientation of his thoughts are always towards what others think of him, therefore, his head is filled with voices of other people's whispering to and about him.

The novel, in addition, contains several stories that are united by one particular location, namely, the Pinnacles, but move in several timelines. Some take place after the Second World War, exactly in 1947, 1958, 1969, 1970 and 1971. Kunzru gives each storyline its full weight and value and connects it rather subtly to the other stories, creating a network of overlapping references. Occasionally, characters from different stories meet each other and always either at or near the three Pinnacles. These seemingly random encounters give the novel its cohesive unity and emphasize the polyphonic nature of the book. In the chapter dated at 1947, Kunzru introduces his readers to an ex-aircraft engineer Schmidt whose storyline is a case in point to polyphony. Schmidt fought in the war and experienced a troubled life after its end because of his alcoholism and addiction to drugs. Back in the day, he was, to cite him directly a "wild boy" who beat his well-connected wife and was sent to prison where he was raped by men his father-in-law paid to revenge his daughter. Traumatized by what happened to him, Schmidt drove to the Desert of Mojave, settled down there, set up an aircraft gas station and started to send messages to the other world. Apart from Davis's visits, Schmidt was entirely alone in the desert, with a plenty of time to think of his wild youth and feel guilty about hurting his wife. His mind replays the shameful incident of beating Lizzie within an inch of her life, but passes furtively over the abuse he suffered at the hands of her father's thugs. He recalls his father-in-law's warning to leave the town or the family would press charges. And as such, Schmidt's past, his family, friends and foes are all introduced to the reader via Schmidt's consciousness as none of them features on his/her own in the novel. More significantly, Kunzru refrains from commenting or offering information about the people who haunt Schmidt. Readers have to take Schmidt's words about how things turned so sour that he had to forgo human communities. Tormented by guilt and shame, he deluded himself into thinking that in the three Pinnacles "there was a power here, running along the fault line and up through the rocks; a natural antenna" (GWM 4). Schmidt sent messages of love and brotherhood of all creatures and beings in the galaxy. His head is filled with extraterrestrial voices and his lucid daydreams document his encounters with aliens and his conversations with them. More than ten years later, the next chapter dated at 1958, sees Schmidt as the founder of the cult and semi-religious community of Ashtar Galactic Command. Schmidt soon literally defeats his loneliness and estrangement by gathering around him lost souls and misfits. His followers find the earth too small for their ardor and

ambition and therefore, made it their mission to contact outer space. This is how Ashtar Galactic Command is founded and how Schmidt became the prophet of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Historical and Ideological Plurality

Gods without Men hosts numerous storylines of cultural, historical and social significance. Apart from the prologue, there are twenty-three chapters which are all dated. Ten chapters are dated at 2008, two chapters at 2009 while eleven chapters go back to the twentieth century dating 1947, 1958, 1969, 1920, 1970, 1920, 1971, and 1942 respectively. Two chapters date back to the eighteenth century (1778 and 1775) and one single chapter goes back to the nineteenth century (1871). So, the historical mishmash of the book is intriguing and ideologically significant as these chapters revisit historically outstanding events or persons. The storylines covered in the two chapters set in 1775 and 1778, reveal true incidents that have roots in American history. In 1775, readers are told that a priest named "Padre Fray Francisco Garcés" set foot in the Arizonan/Californian Desert in which the major events of the novel take place. The priest was the head of a mission sent to the Mojave Desert to investigate the region in order to set forth the establishment of a Christian Church. However, the mission was targeting the Coyotero Apache people, the native habitants of that territory. The priest kept a diary recording the happenings of his daily life in the desert. The final chapter in the novel gives the reader a glimpse into the priest's journal which documents 168 days he spent near the Pinnacles. In the last day, that is, the 168th day, he wrote that he was having some kind of hallucinations to the point that he thought of throwing himself from the rocks. Raving about some mysterious enemies, he wrote that he was saved by an angel in the form of a man with a lion's head (GWM 384). Kunzru does not give any explanation to the priest's condition, leaving any speculations about it to his readers. Childs in his article "Hari Kunzru", stated that what father Garcés saw might be a vision of a man suffering from heat – stroke would see or it might be some kind of divine manifestation (Childs 532).

Kunzru references many real historical and cultural incidents to give his narration a polyphonic dimension and keep his narrative alive and going back and forth between reality and fictionality. The story of Fray Garcés has real roots in the American religious history, as it corresponds to the establishment of the churches between (1600-1775) in the colonial period in the American history. Also another example of the cultural and social multiplicity in the novel can be seen in the very beginning of the novel. Kunzru starts his narrative in an unusual way as he refers to a fable from the native American mythology. He borrows the figure of the Coyote as the main character in the prologue of the novel. Under the title "In the Time when the animals were men", the prologue tells about a human coyote, whose character is based on the trickster beast in the

mythology of Native Americans. Along with its human counterpart, the mythical coyote dies and is reborn repeatedly and the appearance of the coyote whether human or nonhuman is regularly cyclical. The coyote in the prologue prepares drugs (crystals) and he eventually dies because of an explosion that happens while he is cooking the drug. Childs points out that Kunzru uses this story to show the impact of drug addiction on the society and how it can come in many forms (533). Notwithstanding Childs's observation, the coyote's episodes are culturally and socially relevant to America during the 1960s when the hippie subculture grew strong and many young people felt driven towards its world of drug addiction, sexual freedom, and irreligious existence. Connected with the hippie subculture is the UFO Ashtar cult in the novel which Kunzru borrows from the story of the American ufologist and writer Van Tassel (1910-1978) and his followers. Van Tassel's *I Ride a Flying Saucer: the Mystery of the Flying Saucers Revealed* (1952) introduced a cult named "Children of God and Ashtar Command", on which Kunzru bases his story about a New Age Community that settles near the Pinnacles. Kunzru manages to blend mysticism, cult tradition, psychiatry and religious mumbo jumbo to create a narrative about humanity's attempt to navigate through the world in which they are trapped. Kunzru is also very keen on emphasizing the diversity of America and the plurality of the human world.

Conclusion

As argued in the current study, Kunzru's novel *Gods Without Men* offers a polyphonic view of the world along three or more centuries. A variety of cultural and historical references emerge in the novel creating a multiple and plural narrative worlds in the examples of the UFO Cult, the financial world of Wall Street, the hippie subculture and ethnic minorities. The novel carries multiple characteristics of polyphony and dialogism which have been investigated and examined in the current study. Therefore, *Gods Without Men* can be classified as a contemporary polyphonic novel. It embraces a multiplicity of voices and consciousnesses which move and act independently. Kunzru as the creator of these voices neither treats these characters as objects to communicate his ideology nor makes them puppets in his narrative world. All the characters are entitled to their own thoughts and opinions albeit right or wrong. The multiple voices in the narrative are seeking truth whether by rational and secular, or religious and spiritual methods. Each major character has its own orientation towards and methods in searching for the unknown. The novel also embodies a multiplicity of historical, religious and cultural aspects. Kunzru borrows stories of real figures and mentions names of real places to build his fiction on historically documented incidents and give his narrative credibility and reliability.

Works Cited

Aldam, F.L. "Hari Kunzru in Conversation", University of Hong Kong Libraries, 2014.

Bakhtin, M.M. "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" Ed. and Trans. Michael Holquist, Minneapolis; Minnesota Up, 1994.

Bakhtin, M.M. "The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays". Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist, Austin: Texas Up, 1981.

Childs, Peter, "Hari Kunzru", *The Wiley Blackwell Companion of Contemporary British and Irish Literature*. Vol. 11, 2011.

Gary, Richard, "Open Doors, Close Minds: American Prose writing at time of Crises", *American Literary History*. Vol.21 No.1, Oxford University Press, 2009.

The Guardian News Paper, "Author rejects Prize from "anti- Migrant" News Parer, 2013. Retrieved from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/nov/21/pressandpublishing.books>

Haiven, Max, "An Interview with Hari Kunzru: Net Works, Finance Capital and The Fate of the Novel", Routledge, Vol. 28 No.3, 2013.

Kunzru Hari, *Gods Without Men*, Penguin Books, Manchester, 2011.

Mathews, Peter D. "Hacking the society of Control: The Fiction of Hari Kunzru". *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 62, no. 5, 2021, pp. 620-630.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1852157>

Pam Morris Ed. *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writing of Bakhtin, Medvedev And Volosshinov*, 1994.

Vice Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester University Press, 1997.

Zamorano, Llena C. "A Cosmopolitan Conceptualisation of Place and New Topographies of Identity in Hari Kunzru's *Gods without Men*." *Transnational Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-11.