



## THESIS AND DEFENSE APPROVAL FORM

The undersigned certify that they have read the following thesis, examined the defense, are satisfied with the overall exam performance, and recommend the thesis to the Faculty of Languages for acceptance:

**Thesis Title:** The Play of Carnavalesque: A Dialogic Study of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*

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Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **The Play of Carnavalesque: A Dialogic Study of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

I also understand that if evidence of plagiarism is found in my thesis/dissertation at any stage, even after the award of a degree, the work may be cancelled and the degree revoked.

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**The play of Carnavalesque: A Dialogic Study of Lionel  
Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's  
*Vernon God Little***

**Abstract**

This research project investigates Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's novel *Vernon God Little*. The common thread of plot that runs across the texts is the incidence of mass murder by a juvenile school boy at school premises. Both the novels *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Vernon God Little* provide plenty of space to discuss Bakhtinian intertextuality, polyphony, heteroglossia and carnivalesque within the individual text of a novel as well as across the novels. The main argument of the study is that there is diversity of dialogue in socio-cultural, psychological and narrative realms of these novels. The narrative before the mass murder comprises a rhythmic polyphony that originates as low vibes of thought and action, gradually gathers momentum, and finally turns to a screaming noise of the crime-scene situation created by the protagonist. There are ripples of intense voices that sneak into some unusual facets of human nature or society. For instance, an unusual bonding between a loveless mother, Eva Kutchadourian, and an A-normative son, Kevin, in Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* develops a unique dialogic world. In the same way, DBC Pierre's novel *Vernon God Little* comprises heteroglossia of narratives between convicted innocent and the real mass murderer. The intersection of these dialogic perspectives across the selected novels seems to decode the larger scenario of ongoing dialogic relationships in American society. The research method used in the project is textual analysis. The study is likely to be a significant edition in the production of knowledge in the field of Michael Bakhtin's Dialogism.

## Acknowledgement

*I shall be telling with a sigh*

*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,*

*I took the one less travelled by,*

*And that has made all the difference. (Robert Frost)*

I owe eternal feelings of gratitude to Allah the Almighty, the Most Merciful for enabling me to accomplish my dissertation. I am humbled to think of the kind people around me who have lived through the hard times with me. I don't find words to be able to show my indebtedness to my worthy supervisor Professor Dr. Sibghat Ullah who inspired me to write and guided me generously at every step of my write up. He has been determined to keep track of the quality of my work from topic selection to conclusion. It has been a zealous endeavor because of his passionate patience for my mistakes. It is because of his mentoring that I find passion for research rooted deep in me. Today I am able to look back at the working period of this paper as an academic bliss and the quality of thesis gives me vibes of accomplishing a unique dissertation due to respected Sir Sibghat Ullah's inspiring input.

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## Dedication

*I would dedicate this moment of satisfaction to some faces, shadows and stones.*

*To all those faces who bring hope, light and joy to my life.....*

*To all those shadows who shelter me.....*

*To the stones engraved with the names of my beloved parents.....*

*To my siblings...Jamila, Fouzia and Ahmad*

*To my loving husband Amjad Hussain*

*To my mentor Professor Dr. Sibghat Ullah*

*And*

*To my parents Mr and Mrs Mohammad Anwer Awan(Late)*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This research examines Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's novel *Vernon God Little* by invoking Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The project involves the use of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in order to read these two contemporary novels about the stories of gun shooters. The main characters in both the novels are gun shooters and their victims. The shooters and their victims exist in a relation that creates meanings through Bakhtin's theorizing of dialogism. This mutual meaningfulness acts like a mirroring of each other in diverse dialogic situations. Michael Holquist explains the significance of diverse dialogic relations and mutual relation of individual entities. Michael Holquist writes, "Dialogism takes it for granted that nothing can be perceived except against the perspective of something else" (Holquist 33).

In the theory of dialogism, the main assumption is that every entity exists but in a dialogic world. Bakhtin explains this dialogic world in terms of coordinates of space and time. Every person or entity or text occupies its unique coordinates of time and space in the universe. The coordinates of two different entities are mutually relevant. Through this mutual relevance of coordinates in time and space, the entities relate to each other (Holquist 33).

This mutual co-relation is defined by Bakhtin as dialogism. Bakhtin describes it as an essential dialogic relation of everything with everything else. There is no entity that exists out of this dialogic relation. Robinson Andrew further explains the concept of dialogic relation in this world. Robinson writes:

We are always in dialogue with the other people and the world around. Everything addresses us in a certain way. Thus every one of us is uniquely addressed in our place in the world. One can see one's exterior through other's perspective. (Andrew 42)

Human mind perceives meaning through the contrast between its foreground and background. The difference between such placements of coordinates creates a dualism. This dualism is the core concept of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The dualism makes the existence of one entity significantly relevant to another activity. The mind is structured in a way that the world is always perceived according to this contrast. Basically, dialogism is not just a dualism but an essential multiplicity for human perception. This dualism is a sort of binary between "self" and the "other," through which human mind perceives reality in space and time. The position of each entity in relation to the other entity in place creates a mutual dialogic relation and gives them the concept of the "self" and the "other." Dialogism is a phenomenon that is inevitable between "self" and the "other." According to Michael Holquist in *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*:

The dualism of self and the other is taken as a perceiver and the world. For the self or the perceiver, his or her own time is forever unfinished and open. Their own space is always the centre of perception. In contrast to this, the time in which others or the world is perceived is taken as closed or finished. (Holquist 34)

The duality of time is mesmerising as it is active, unfinished, and open time for Vernon while, for the rest of the world, the dialogic binary of time is closed, stable, and finished. In *Vernon God Little*, the protagonist Vernon feels time has multiple implications and status for him; "Now it's Friday at Sheriff's office, feels like a Friday at school or something" (Pierre 3). The coordinates of time and space give meaning to everything around the "self" due to its coordinates of time and place. As for the "other" the coordinates of space and time are different, so the meanings of same surrounding entities are different for the "other." This individuality of perception causes everything in this world to be in dialogue with everything around.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism acts as core philosophy of my project due to the significance of the dialogue and its inevitability in the text. I applied this inevitability of dialogue as basic logic in my primary texts to produce meaning of their dialogic relations and to decode the silence, voices, and their relation to multiple consciousnesses. Here the question arises that is it possible to reach one absolute meaning through the analysis of dialogic relations.

Through Bakhtin's theorising, it is explicit in my project that the perceiver observes the plurality of meanings, instead of one absolute meaning. This meaning may change as the position of the "self" or the "other" changes. It is so because Bakhtin believes in plurality of voices and consciousnesses. This plurality of voices is defined as polyphony. Dialogism explains individual's existence through its cardinals of space and time. It reveals that the individual exists in its own space and has its own voice. For more than one individual in a setting, there can never be a single representative voice as a narrator, there must be more than one voices showing plurality of consciousnesses. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism helps me as a researcher to listen to the individual voices of characters in my primary texts.

There is another question about this plurality of meaning that how multiple meanings exist mutually and how the "self" and the "other" perceive this pluralism of meanings. Robinson Andrew in his article "In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony, and Heteroglossia," writes, "In Bakhtin, there is no one meaning being striven for, the world is a vast aggregation of contesting meanings" (Andrew 40). The contesting meanings exist mutually in a dialogic relationship. The dialogue gives a uniqueness to every entity within a dialogic reality. Robinson Andrew writes that "there is so intense diversity of heteroglossia in the world that no single term can simply unify its meaning" (Andrew 40).

The dialogism provokes multiplicity of meaning and form that can be defined as heteroglossia. The individual meaning in a simple dialogic relation is linked to some other simple dialogue and both dialogic relations are existing in a vast heteroglossia world, as Andrew writes, "Bakhtin sees the existence as an event and the world as an activity" (Andrew 40). The individual event occurs to the "self" or "I."

In this study, the concept of "self" is closely related to polyphony of a unique type that exists within the paradigms of a single individual on a single object. For instance, in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Eva Khatchadourian exhibits polyphony on her own narrative when she speaks in multiple perspectives. This varying perspective of a single individual appears as changing shades of rainbow or multiple paradigms of "I" or "self" through a prism reflection of polyphonic narrative.

The multiplicity of perspectives reflects in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in Eva's behaviour, as a mother, as a resistant unconventional self-loving individual and a tolerant victim of mass murder. This multiple paradigm is polyphonic in substance. Eva's behaviour in reaction to Kevin's crime is submissive and tolerant. She is the most affected victim of the incident who lost her daughter, husband and her self-image due to Kevin's act, yet she is the one who is tolerant towards the social reaction that she has to face as Kevin's mother. Her reactive nature with Kevin, as a young boy was harsh and noisy while her absorbing silence as a murderer's mother is quite opposite to it. These are the multiple, contrasting, shades of her consciousness that show how plurality of consciousness can be explored within a single "self" by applying Bakhtin's theory. It equally helps to understand polyphonic existence of multiple narratives within "self" and in its dialogic relations with the surrounding.

The mutual relation of the individual and the surrounding is basic stimulant to generate a dialogue. According to Michael Holquist, "the narrative discourse speaks for different individuals in their own varying voices while it speaks for one individual's many standpoints in different situations also" (Holquist 35). The phenomenon of multiplicity of voices within an individual also happens when Eva changes her stance on a single matter according to her role play.

Eva resists intimacy with her son Kevin as an A-normal mother. She retaliates to his offensive acts not as a conventional considerate mother but as a rival. Eva breaks her son Kevin's water gun in response to his water shooting on her room's wall. She also breaks his arm when he pees in his pants and she had to clean him. She suspects him of blinding his sister's eye quite unlike Franklin, Eva's husband, who resists and dislikes her apprehensions about Kevin. Quite opposing to these unmotherly responses comes Eva's response at the end of the story where she embraces her son who is a convicted mass murderer in jail.

The multiple voices in the text and their impact on the characters and their dialogic relations is discussed in Robinson Andrews' article. Robinson Andrew writes, "Bakhtin's idea of polyphony admits the presence of multiple voices, perspectives, and narratives that exist individually within a text without being subordinated to any single authorial voice or narrative" (Andrew 39). This phenomenon of polyphony can be used to analyse the psychological, cultural, and social perspective of everyone's microcosm within the macrocosm of Lionel Shriver's

*We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The utterances as well as the silence between Eva and Kevin are significant in analysing the dynamics of polyphonic relation between the two characters. The reader is exposed to a multiplicity of voices. The reader experiences Eva's voice as a restless unhappy vigilant mother and Franklin's voice as a prototype of conventional naive father.

Franklin is beguiled throughout the story by Kevin who is mentally different from normal boys. Though Eva can see through the apparently normal behaviour of her son Kevin with her husband Franklin, yet she stays silent. At this point there is plurality of consciousnesses and multiplicity of perspectives in the text that makes the characters speak their minds or their own side of the prism quite independently to each other or to the author's voice.

The narrative cannot be reduced to a single voice or a single consciousness in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Therefore, there is no room for monologist linear narrative. A multi-voiced or many voiced narrative develops through the discourse of the novel. So, polyphonic dialogism between an individual's own varying paradigms offers further detailed substance for textual analysis in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism.

According to Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism, the textual analysis of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* has social implications too. There appears a larger world of social reality comprising tiny little worlds of everyone's own subjective reality that contains different voices and boundaries. The point where Eva's boundaries end defines the beginning of Kevin's own little subjective world with his own voice and perspectives. These tiny cosmoses exist in a larger cosmos of the society. They interact with each other and with the society at large.

After the conviction of mass murder by Kevin, he is sent to jail and Eva is left all alone. She is faced with society as a criminal's mother. This post incident phase of a lonely mother puts her in a much intensive dialogue with the society around her. Eva is silent and non-reactant. When one of the victims' mother attacks her physically, she refuses to take help and tolerates the physical and mental pain with acutely miserable silence. The noise of Halloween crowd numbs her senses. This dialogue between Eva and the mothers of Kevin's victims shows deep socio-cultural implications. There are two perspectives of the same situation. None of them is

wrong, yet the social reality can only be explained in terms of multiplicity of consciousness or polyphony in Bakhtinian terms. As Michael Holquist writes:

Bakhtin views humanity as fundamentally indeterminate and unfinalizable. People constantly struggle against external definitions of their thought and actions, which have deadening effects on them. There is something within each concrete person which can be actualised through a free discursive act and not in a predefined context. (Holquist 44)

The individual like Eva, who displays an unconventional approach to the society's pre-defined norms of motherhood, portrays a challenging persona. Her consciousness seems complicated enough to be portrayed under the authorial monologist voice of a writer.

The complexity of relationship between Eva and her son Kevin is a source to analyse such unconventional characters under the term of Bakhtin's dialogism. There is enough space in Bakhtin's dialogic world to actualise the subjective reality of Eva and Kevin simultaneously. Otherwise in case of a single-voiced narrative the sparkling characterisation of the rare personas like Eva and Kevin, might have been reduced to flat characters. Heteroglossia is another aspect of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination. Michael Holquist says:

According to Bakhtin, each text is constructed comprising various genres or texts in novel. It is because of this heterogeneous nature of the textual hybridisation that Bakhtin defines the genre of novel as an evolving or growing genre that is changing with the passage of time. (Holquist 56)

Holquist's statement directly relates to Bakhtin's concept of novel as a genre. According to which novel is striving through its evolutionary developmental process from single unified authorial voice to multiplicity of voices, consciousnesses, and texts. Though this discussion of novel as a genre by Bakhtin does not lie directly within the realm of my framework, yet it conforms to the basic research questions of my dissertation. It is so because my primary texts are novels and this breaking away from a monotone authorial voice reaffirms their position as polyphonic texts of novel as a genre. Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* embrace variety of texts within them. This diversity of textual narrative helps explore heteroglossia in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The discourse offers

varied linguistic patterns based on realistic variety of narratives by characters. Kevin in his early age mimics his parents' dialogues in monosyllabic utterances. The narrative of letters by Eva to her husband shows unique heteroglossia as they turn out to be written by Eva to her husband Franklin after his death.

The exchange of dialogue between Eva and her son is unconventional in terms of being a conversation between a mother and her son. It seems to be devoid of affection and feelings. It appears to be submerged in a creepy feeling of uncertainty and fear. The events revolve around Eva's pathetic expressions on her son's violent acts or aggressive behaviour of Kevin on his mother's cold behaviour. The title of the book *We Need to Talk about Kevin* implies the intense meaningfulness of heteroglossia as it is the text that is related to talk about problematic situation. It may be specific to any single situation, yet it is relevant to any day-to-day speech. It is reflecting the open nature of language as Bakhtin claims; the meanings change with reference to the context and situation.

My study explores the play of carnivalesque and its dialogic relation in the primary texts according to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Michael Bakhtin discusses the theory of carnivalesque himself in *Rabelais and His World*. Jaireth writes, "Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque is discussed in *Rabelais and His world* in a unique and systematic way" (Jaireth). The Carnivalesque is discussed by Bakhtin in his analysis of the Dostoevsky's novel. Wellek's article explains the core concept of Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque. Wellek in the article, "Bakhtin's View of Dostoevsky: Polyphony and Carnivalesque", writes:

Bakhtin himself says that Carnival belongs to the whole people; it liberates from fear, brings the man close to man and man to his fellow man. Bakhtin seems to believe that the carnivalesque enters all kinds of relations, it transforms itself, enters all kinds of genres but stays the same throughout history. (Wellek 37)

Carnivalesque is deeply rooted to the phenomenon of exhibiting masculinity and power through death in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. The Juvenile murderers build a mask of pleasure and festivity and play mock killings with arch in case of Kevin or lighter crimes in case of Jesus Navarro. The brutal moment of death is revealed with the first spill of blood.



The carnival is unmasked in the inner realm, the sphere of dialogue shifts from the protagonists to victim and now it is moved to the outer realm of dialogue which is between the murderer and the world. Here the carnivalesque is spread out as a news thriller to the masses. The blooded floors and bruised bodies are shining in flashes of cameras and the carnivals is thrown out from crime scene to the world around. The dialogue is shifted from the centre of protagonists' "self" to the victim's self. In the forthcoming discussion, I locate my project in the shootout literature.

### **1.1 Locating Shootout Literature**

The shootout literature contextualises my project from multiple perspectives. It adds meaning to the selection of my primary texts and its analysis through Bakhtin's theory. Each of the selected novels that I review here from the perspective of contextualisation of my dissertation relates to some significant aspect of my work. For instance, the first shoot out, literary work that is reviewed in my study for this purpose is a memoir by Sue Klebold with the title, *A Mother's Reckoning Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*.

The memoir is written by Sue Klebold, the mother of one of the shooters of the tragedy that took place at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999. Her son Dylan Klebold along with Eric Harris kills thirteen people including one teacher. In this shoot out at school by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris twenty-four students are injured. The most tragic incident ends with the two shooters taking their own lives after killings. Sue Klebold recognises the need to share her regrets and experiences with other victims of such events.

Her sharing of pain, remorse, questions, and memories of her child brings into play the emotional empathy of a large population with the shooters' and their parents. It brings to question the background circumstances, forces, deficiencies, and mental problems that turned the promising young men into suicidal mass shooters.

Sue Klebold's memoir *A Mother's Reckoning Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy* contextualises my thesis from the perspective of comparative literature to my primary texts. In Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* the mass shooter Kevin's mother Eva passes through the same phases of aftermath of the tragedy. Her son Kevin kills his school mates in a frenzy of idealised manhood. Like Sue Klebold, Eva Khatchadourian probes into the life of her son to diagnose his reasons for

abnormalities. The dialogic relations between Eva and Sue Klebold can be established to diagnose the factors that lie behind the fateful tragedy. Thus, Sue Klebold's memoir endows scholarly situatedness to my study in the contemporary shoot out literature. It contextualises my dissertation and establishes its relevance to a real shootout event and its consequences. It situates my project in the contemporary scenario through parallels between Sue Klebold and Eva. Similarly, it establishes parallel between Dylan Klebold and Kevin.

Stephen King's novel, *Rage*, contextualises my project from the perspective of the shooter's mental analogy with Kevin. According to the flap cover of the novel, its first edition was released in 1977 in a paperback edition. The novel relates the story of Charlie Decker, a student of high school who kills his teacher. Charlie takes his classmates as hostages. In a terrible environment, Charlie forces his fellows to talk about their inner thoughts (King, 1985). Sara Martin Alegre in her article, "Nightmares of Childhood: The Child and the Monster in Four Novels by Stephen King", defines *Rage* as "popular gothic novel." She writes:

King's fiction is morally ambiguous about father and child relationship because King may put his finger on dark areas of American lifestyle but lacks an answer as to how American society could protect its own children from the horrors adults inflict on them. (Alegre 105)

The novel contextualises my project from the perspective of initiating a dialogue among the institutions that play a role in the collapse of a child's personality. Stephen King's *Rage* portrays the realistic picture of "decay of institutions in America's family resulting in the disastrous breakdown of parent-child relationship" (Alegre 105). The same breakdown of parent-child relationship is portrayed in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Stephen King's *Rage* seems to be one of the novels that predicted the consequences of American family disasters in the form of horror coming to the children's lives.

The fairy tale school room imagery turns into horror movie scene due to the unbearable adult pressure on Charlie Decker's mind in *Rage*. The same adult relationship failure stirs a dialogue between Kevin and his loveless mother Eva in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. This is ironical that *Rage* as a horror story portrays the future of school disasters in American children's lives while

Shriver's novel takes up the same dialogue as in *Rage* and gives it a multi-dimensional dialogic form. *Rage* gives situatedness to my project by relating to it as an initial diagnostic dialogue between American family and its future.

Heidi Strengell in *Dissecting Stephen King from Gothic to Literary Naturalism* writes: "in King's fictional world the anticipation of future horrors is embedded in innocently realistic settings and seemingly true-to-life characters" (Strengell 7). The anticipation is traced in the recent history of emerging gun shooter personas in the academic institutions of America. Charlie Decker's character that was originally taken as a gothic novel's fantasy horror character reappears as a realistic portrayal of American history's new hero as Kevin in Lionel Shriver's novel. The analogy between the two novels is ironic as both the novels generate variety of dialogism among institutions and individuals in the backdrop of gun shooting in schools. The difference is that *Rage* seems to be a horror story that should not come true and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is the realistic portrayal of darker corners of society. It seems to be more horrible than *Rage*.

Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* contextualises my project from the perspective of analytical approach towards the background factors of a gun shooting incident at American schools. *Nineteen Minutes* relates the story of a seventeen-year-old student Peter Houghton. The protagonist Peter Houghton has been suffering due to the harassment by other students of school. The bullying at school puts intense pressure on Peter's nerves and he finally ends up in extreme act of violence as a reaction to the intolerable stress. Lucy and Lewis Houghton probe retrospectively their relationship with their child Peter to discover their mishandling of the child. There seems to be parallel between Eva's self-accountability in the aftermath of tragedy in her son's shooting rampage and Lucy and Lewis' probing into their behaviour with their son.

Therefore, the above discussed shootout fiction helps me locate my project in the current literary scenario. It adds weightage to my study in terms of its relevance to the current socio-cultural American reality. Under the next sub-heading, I discuss my situatedness as a researcher and the research.

## 1.2 The Situatedness of the Researcher and the Research

The project is significant for me because of my situatedness as a researcher in Pakistani society. In the American society, the incidents of shootout happen frequently at various locations. The similar events of shootout also happen in Pakistan. Pakistan has been through a long period of terrorist activity. In recent years, Pakistani citizens have faced sudden outbursts of gun shooting at public places by terrorists. It has fear, uncertainty, and insecurity in Pakistani society. As a researcher, this phenomenon of fear and anxiety in my surroundings helps me relate my situation to the American gun shooting incidents.

My dissertation is also closely related to the contemporary Pakistani society as it brings home the similar incident of children's mass shooting at school that took place on Dec 16, 2014 in the Army Public School Peshawar. It was a militant attack of terrorists who killed 146 people of the school, including 132 children, in mass shooting. Pakistan army launched a rescue operation and killed all the six terrorists. Army also rescued the hostages of school community.

The cold-blooded murder of innocent children is a mirror image of American school shooting events. The insanity of the attackers and the innocence of the victims makes the two events similar as scars on humanity, evoking pain as well as sympathy as a universal phenomenon, crossing all borders of nationality, race, colour or religion.

The study also situates my position as a researcher as it engages the stakeholders of gun shooting in America and Pakistan across the cultural boundaries because of a recent gun shooting event at Santa Fe High School, Texas. The recently happened fateful event of a seventeen-year-old Pakistani student Sabika Sheikh's death in a gun shooting event in American school relates to the cross-cultural significance of my project. In the sad event on May 20, 2018, at Santa Fe High school at Texas the seventeen-year-old shooter Dimitrios Pagourtzis killed ten persons including Pakistani student Sabika Sheikh (BBC News).

Sabika Sheikh went to America for studies in a cultural exchange scholarship programme between Pakistan and America. The student was sent from Pakistan with a conviction for her bright future. It shows Pakistani community's trust in America's peaceful educational environment at the academic institutions. Sabika's death, as a

foreign student, in the host country puts many questions on the American academic system. The dissertation delves deep into the core issues of American socio-cultural life as an element in dialogue with the American educational system and brings to surface the answers to many essential questions on the topic. The dialogic realm of Bakhtin's theory extends across the boundaries to discuss the impact of the violence in American schools on the academia of other countries directly and indirectly.

Thus, the similarity of gun shooting incidents in Pakistan and America puts me in a better position to situate my project as a relevant study for me as a Pakistani researcher. It also enables me to explore shared impact of mass killing in both the countries and situates the project in current academic realm. In the following sub-heads, I have briefly stated the delimitation, thesis statement, and research questions of the paper respectively.

### **1.3 Delimitation**

This research project is limited to Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* from the perspective of Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism with special focus on heteroglossia, polyphony, and carnivalesque.

### **1.4 Thesis Statement**

Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* depict diversified dialogic relationships in unusual social settings. The novels seem to reveal taboo paradigms, unusual accounts of black corners of life, the darker aspects of institutional decay, and disintegration of family life through Bakhtinian lens of heteroglossia, polyphony, and carnivalesque.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. How do Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* exhibit variety of dialogism?
2. How are heteroglossia and polyphony embedded within and across the selected texts?
3. How is the play of carnivalesque significant in generating a diversity of dialogic relations?

In the following sub-head, I have briefly reviewed the research plan.

## 1.6 Research Plan

The study comprises six chapters. In the first chapter, I have developed a rationale of my thesis. I have narrated this argument logically as a three-tier knot between the selected primary texts of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The logical reasoning of the research argument is based on Bakhtin's theory. The contemporary shoot out literature is briefly reviewed to contextualise my project within the existing scholarship.

In Chapter 1, I explain the situatedness of the project. It is followed by the brief review of chapter breakdown as given in the research plan of my project. It gives an overview of the research layout and its outline. The chapter also contains the research questions and delimitations of the project. These research questions set the direction in which the research is conducted. The significance of the study situates the project in the relevant literary scenario.

In chapter 2, I have reviewed the selected secondary sources to discover the situatedness of my project in the existing scholarship. The secondary sources contextualise my study and give it situatedness in contemporary critical corpus. The review of various sources provides new paradigms for my textual analysis and leads to some significant discussion in accordance with my theoretical framework.

In chapter 3, I have discussed the basic research design. The basic framework of the dissertation is qualitative research method along with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as Research Method." I have given an introduction of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism with reference to polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque. This chapter gives the relevance of my research argument with my selected theory and explains that how the theory suits my framework and the primary texts.

In Chapter 4, I have analysed the primary text of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The textual analysis is done qualitatively using Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as Research Method" and by theorizing Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism with focus on the terms of polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque.

In Chapter 5 of the study, I have made textual analysis of DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* according to my research design. The text welcomes Bakhtin's theorizing of dialogism. I have probed the text with focus on finding answers to my research questions. The textual analysis reveals significant findings and helps me conclude the analysis meaningfully at the end of the chapter.

In chapter 6, I have summed up the previous chapters briefly and gave my findings in a comprehensive fashion. The concluding discussion in the chapter shows that Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* have been studied and critically analysed from different aspects of my research design. These works have been probed in America and abroad to identify the causes of such incidents and to suggest certain preventions or discern symptoms of such forthcoming unfortunate events. However, the topic has not yet been studied from the perspective of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Therefore, the project has explored the subject from a new dimension.

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The significance of this research project lies in the fact that the selected texts have not been studied from the point of view of Bakhtinian theory of dialogism yet. Although this area of study has been explored from psychological and socio-political perspectives, there is no study available from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony, and carnivalesque, especially with reference to my primary texts. The research project fills the gap and relates Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to the darker aspects of contemporary culture of American society. According to my Research Plan, I have reviewed secondary sources in the forthcoming chapter to situate my dissertation in contemporary scholarship.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to situate the dissertation in the contemporary critical corpus by reviewing the relevant secondary sources. Reviewing the secondary sources is significant for achieving two objectives: one is, contextualising the project within the present scholarship and second is finding the gaps in contemporary critical knowledge in my area of study. I have reviewed secondary sources that fall into different categories due to the kind of situatedness they provide for my project. The selected secondary sources are either partially relevant to the project or share some trait of my conceptual framework features. Some of the secondary sources focus on the same lens of Bakhtin's theory that I have applied in the project. In the forthcoming discussion, I have reviewed the secondary sources.

#### 2.2 Review of the Sources

Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan's article "The Heteroglossia in *Wuthering Heights*" (2009) is significantly related to the project. Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan uses Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism to explore the text of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* for its heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism. Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan reviews the history of evolution of novel from a monoglot authorial narration to a heteroglot, polyphonic, and dialogic narration. He traces the evolutionary footprints of novel's growth, as a genre, by using Bakhtin's dialogism.

Cumhur Yilmaz identifies the monologist centralisation as a centripetal force that drives the genre towards a monologist world of author's voice. The diversity of language, speech, and dialect make the novel a document of social diversity. He applies Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, with special focus on heteroglossia, to explore the multiplicity of speech and plurality of consciousness in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Emily Bronte broke away with the traditional Victorian novel because of her



individual approach to form and style(Cecil 185, my paraphrase). This individual style roots deeper into Emily Bronte's profoundly dialogic style of writing.

Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan's article "The Heteroglossia in *Wuthering Heights*" (2009) uses Bakhtin's lens to explore Emily Bronte's narrative style. In *Wuthering Heights* there is double narrator technique applied by Emily Bronte. This double narration is switched mainly between Nelly Dean and Lockwood. The "absence of authorial voice" reflects Emily Bronte's craftsmanship and voids the novel of any authorial voice as a reliable judge (Krupat 271).

Cumhur Yilmaz comments that the two narrators Nelly Dean and Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* do not replace each other rather each of them has his own distinctive position. The narrative plain comprises "metadiegetic embeddings" through Nelly's discourse and "extradiegetic frame" due to Lockwood's diary entries (Newman 1033). It overall adds heteroglossia to the narration. There are the characters' voices as well as the two narrator's voices. The reader listens to all the voices in their own dialects and from their own specific perspectives. There might be ambiguity at some point about the truth in the reader's mind. This is the true essence of heteroglossia, as a temporary confusion arises in the reader's mind because of listening to multiple opinions. Later he seeks the truth through his perception about the narrator's vision. Alan. R. Brick here comments that "the truth is identified by the reader by intercepting the conversation of such characters like Heathcliff and Catherine who speak hearts with each other" (Brick 84).

Emily Bronte created her own narrative style that comprised double narrators and multiple plot. David Richter points out that by creating this narrative style that is devoid of authorial monotone and single plot unity, Emily Bronte broke away with Aristotle's rules of plot unity given in his book *Poetics*(Richter 38). Emily Bronte provided freedom of listening to multiple narrators especially to her reader and did not limit him to the linear narration by a single narrator. This writing style empowers the reader to be able to switch to different speakers and it also enables the writer to float different opinions on a single event. Nicholas Marsh comments that this narrative style implies multiple filters on a single speech. "Multiple consciousnesses listen to it and filter the truth about it in their own way" (Marsh 43). These voices mix and mingle to produce a polyphonic narrative.

There are variety of textual styles within one novel. As the multiple voices and narratives struggle to produce a truthful version of narrator's stance and imprint their effect on the reader's opinion separately. Similarly the variety of text styles and discourses contest for the decisive genre of Emily Bronte's novel. J. Hillis Miller comments about this feature of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* that "one text style overlaps and encloses the next narrative in such a way that the boundaries between the texts are blurred" (Gordon 737). The heteroglossia and polyphony make a dialogic struggle so empowering in the narrative text that it surpasses the conventional style and definition of the novel. Hence it is neither gothic nor romantic rather a dialogic narrative of its own type that breaks away from controlling centripetal forces and escapes the Aristotelian concept of unity of plot and form.

Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan's article "The Heteroglossia in *Wuthering Heights*" (2009) contextualises the project by focussing critical attention to the area. It discusses Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as a genre that exhibits polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism. Cumhur Yilmaz probes the novel as a scripture from Bakhtin's lens. It gives background analysis for the thesis, as I also view Lionel Shriver and DBC Pierre as dialogic writers who welcome heteroglossia, and polyphony in their work.

The article situates the study in the contemporary critical knowledge in my area. Firstly, it uses Bakhtin's theory about the definition of novel, its evolution through time and its place in literature, as a genre. It minutely observes the text of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as the original deviation from the monologist to dialogism. The novel is placed in a researcher's view as a phase in the development of novel. This relates to one aspect of the project which is to analyse Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* from the perspective of their position as a dialogic text in the development of novel as a genre and the way they differ in their approach to form and content, from other novels as a genre. It can also be put in this way that how these novels endorse Bakhtin's theory of novel as a genre, by depicting heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism.

Secondly, the paradigm from which Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan's article "the Heteroglossia in *Wuthering Heights*" (2009) locates the situatedness of the study is its framework that is partially based on the lens of Bakhtin's theory. Cumhur Yilmaz Mardan's article uses the lens of Bakhtin's theory to analyse the text of Emily Bronte's

*Wuthering Heights* for its heteroglossia. This usage of Bakhtin's term of heteroglossia also partially overlaps with the theoretical frame work of the project as I have used the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism to analyse the selected texts to explore heteroglossia and polyphony. Therefore, selection of Emily Bronte's novel in Mardan's article for analysis through Bakhtin's theory and its focus on Bakhtinian term of heteroglossia for textual analysis of the text contextualises my study and situates it in the contemporary scholarship in my area of study.

However, there are certain gaps in Cumhuriyet Yilmaz Mardan's article that signify the need for further research. For instance, Cumhuriyet Yilmaz' article focuses on the macrolevel discussion about form by relating Emily Bronte's novel to the evolutionary phases of novel from monologist to dialogism. It does not probe in the miniature world of individual character's narrative and its relation to the world around through its polyphonic voice. This gap is taken up in my project where things move from micro to macro level and discuss the polyphony and heteroglossia on both the levels and their mutual bonding.

Michael Dunne's article "Dialogism in Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*" (1995) is closely relevant to my project. In the article, the writer examines Argentinian author Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* from the perspective of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Michael intricately probes the text to comment upon Manuel Puig's use of polyphony and dialogism in it. Michael also discusses the aptness of novel as a genre for Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The article discloses the parallel between Bakhtin's use of term "grotesque body" and its application on Manuel Puig's novel. Michael amazes the reader by his "exploration of variety of dialogism" in Manuel Puig's novel (Dunne 120).

Manuel Puig brings closer to each other two diverse characters from society into a single jail cell. Luis Molina is a transgender charged for "homosexuality with a minor". The second prisoner sharing the same cell is Valentin Arregui who is charged for rebellion against the government. The isolated world of the jail cell comprises these two characters together who exist in a dialogic relation with each other. Dialogism emerges in different forms due to the efforts of these individual to communicate with each other in a blank world of jail cell.

The jail cell, as an entity, is in dialogue with the world around. The two individuals kept together in isolation are in dialogue with each other. Manuel Puig's text is itself in dialogue with the reader. Structurally, the footnotes given at the end of the page create a dialogue between the theoretical knowledge by the psychologists like Sigmund Freud and fictional creation by the writer.

Ideologically, the text creates a dialogue between the narrative of the ruling party and its opponents. On a philosophic level, Manuel Puig creates a dialogue by inserting different text genres in the novel. Bakhtin in *the Dialogic Imagination* writes that novel is a flexible genre and different text genres are easily infused into it. In Puig's novel the amalgam of songs, music, stories, letter, and a grocery list make it an interesting playing field for the dialogue of multiple genres. Bakhtin comments in *the Dialogic Imagination* that almost all kind of genres have been included in novel. Some of these "genres retain their structures and others are merged into the novel's texture" (Dunne 123).

Michael Dunne defined the term polyphony as given in Mikhail Bakhtin's *the Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Dunne 121). Michael Dunne implied Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to Manuel Puig's *the Kiss of the Spider Woman* at multiple levels.

There is polyphony on three levels in the novel: generic, visual and semantic. One type of polyphony is recognised by Michael Dune as discursive polyphony. It exists in the form of variety of text genre, placed one after another in the form of a grocery list, handed over by Molina to the prison warden. The grocery list consists of sixteen delicacies of food. It sounds like an everyday household activity being pronounced in a routine matter. The discourse that lies immediately before and after this text of food items is different from the list.

The diversity of dialogue in a continuous narrative creates plurality of voices and consciousnesses. Before the grocery items list is provided to warden by Molina, he tells her about the effect of this luxury food on Valentin's mood. It would allude him to trust Molina and he would share his political secrets with him. Thus, Molina's mission in jail will be accomplished. Soon after the list items are pronounced, Molina and Valentin discuss food and eat it. The flow of the text before and after the food list

makes it polyphonic and this kind of polyphony is called “discursive polyphony” by Michael Dunnes. Michael relates this kind of polyphony in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* with Bakhtin’s theory of discursive polyphony in *Dostoevsky’s Politics*. Michael Dunnes constructs this parallel between Bakhtin’s analysis of polyphony in *Dostoevsky’s Politics*, and discursive polyphony in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* through multiple examples.

Polyphony is also expressed in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* through a letter. It is written by Molina for Valentin for his beloved Marta. Valentin speaks, and Molina writes it down. So, it is not in the form of a formal text of a letter, rather it is hetero-voiced by Molina and Valentin in the form of a dialogue. The letter induces polyphony stylistically as well as meaningfully. Molina Uses the pronoun “we”, once to mention Valentin and his beloved and then to refer to him and Valentin. The letter is embedded in the text in the form of conversation. It adds multiplicity of voices and meanings. Similarly, music adds polyphony to the novel. It is enhanced through Molina’s singing of Boleros. Boleros are the source of “double-voiced discourse” (Dunne 124). Therefore, on one level they are giving the meaning on behalf of the singer and on second level they are giving meaning to Valentin’s thoughts as a listener.

These Boleros sung by Molina and romantic film stories told by him add another genre to the text as well as increase the polyphonic diversity of the novel. Michael comments on this “double-voiced polyphony” and says that Boleros and film stories indulge the writer and the reader into an indirect dialogue about the story (Dunne 124, my paraphrase). Another polyphonic feature of the novel is its scripture of footnotes of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Michael Dunne uses the term polyphonic dialogue to comment upon the dialogic relation of multiple consciousness in the novel that includes the writer, the narrator, the readers, and the text. The dialogue seems to construct a narrative among Manuel Puig, his characters, and his diverse text.

Thus, Michael Dunne’s article “Dialogism in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*” (1995) gives situatedness to my dissertation in the critical corpus through its use of Bakhtin’s term of polyphony and dialogism in its analysis of Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. As I have also applied Bakhtin’s lens of polyphony and dialogism to discover the dialogic relations in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little*, the textual analysis of the Manual Puig’s

novel by Michael Dunne seems to reflect a symmetrical approach to my theoretical framework in some ways. Michael Dunne's article "Dialogism in Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*" (1995) also contextualises my thesis. The exploration of dialogic relation among the characters of Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* contextualises my project in terms of application of Bakhtinian theory of dialogism to a novel.

Michael Dunne's application of the term "polyphony" and "grotesque body" situates my project within the realm of existing critical knowledge. While Michael Dunne's exploration of the term polyphony provides room for my framework to expand its exploration of polyphony in the textual analysis of Lionel Shriver and DBC Pierre's novel. One of the limitations of Michael Dunne's article is that it does not elaborate the textual analysis of discursive polyphony as well as visual, generic, and semantic polyphony sufficiently.

Ksana Blank's article, "The Rabbit and the Duck: Antinomic Unity in Dostoevsky, the Russian Religious Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin" (2007) is significant for my study. The article elaborates the philosophical relation between Dostoevsky's theory of antinomic unity and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Ksana Blank in this article explains that the two opposing truths contained in a single fact can be understood as two dialogic dimensions of a single whole. These opposing facts, discovered by Dostoevsky, should not be taken as irreconcilable facts rather through Bakhtinian lens of dialogism these facets seem to be the variant parts of an organic whole(Blank 3, my paraphrase).

Ksana Blank uses a visually complicated drawing by the psychologist Joseph Jastrow to explain the "Dostoevsky's theory of thesis and antithesis". It is an interesting drawing that has also been utilised by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work. Wittgenstein analysed the drawing by Joseph Jastrow to explain the limitation of human mind. He showed that human mind can understand the drawing only through the familiar aspect. If someone has previously seen duck but is unfamiliar with the rabbit, he will identify the drawing as a duck and vice versa. Thus, Wittgenstein's theory explained how human perception is related to past knowledge and experience.

Ksana Blank uses this “Rabbit and Duck Theory” by Wittgenstein to explain the apparently paradoxical nature of Dostoevsky’s authorial position in his novels. Dostoevsky logically supports one of his characters who may see rabbit in Joseph Jastrow’s drawing. Then he fully develops the logical argument in favour of the character who supposedly sees duck in the drawing. This creates ambiguity about the author’s own perspective. It becomes difficult for the reader to know that what is Dostoevsky’s own position on some issue.

James Scanlan in *Dostoevsky the Thinker* states that Dostoevsky takes his protagonist and antagonist’s perspective in terms of thesis and anti-thesis. He supports thesis but explains the anti-thesis too, to expose the false notion hidden in it. According to Scanlan, Dostoevsky sternly believes in the supremacy of higher moral values and establishes their victory over false attitudes and thoughts. Scanlan brought to light the optimistic aspect of Dostoevsky’s moral code (Blank 22, my paraphrase).

Ksana Blank now finalises the whole argument on Dostoevsky and Wittgenstein by relating it to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. James Scanlan considers that Dostoevsky’s analysis of his characters seems polyphonic in the sense that he endows each character with an individual voice and consciousness. However, his theological position does not let him leave his character stay without judgement. “This factor forces him to develop a latent monologist stance within a tersely crafted dialogic world” (Blank 23).

Steven Cassedy in *Dostoevsky’s Religion* states that Dostoevsky shared the beliefs of both the rabbit and the duck. Cassedy’s argument that in Dostoevsky’s narrative darkness and light weigh equal. It is hard to distinguish that with whom Dostoevsky relates: The author repeatedly adopts a position one day only to adopt a position later that calls into question or flatly contradicts the first position. Cassedy is of the view that the characters of Dostoevsky’s novels reflect such contradictions.

Mikhail Bakhtin in *the Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* gives another aspect of the Dostoevsky’s voice as an author in his works. Bakhtin emphasises that Dostoevsky allows his characters to exist with their own consciousnesses and voices. He lets them think and speak independently. As an author he seems to listen to them silently. All the voices of various characters can be heard independently and without

any moral judgement by the author. Bakhtin calls this feature the polyphony of Dostoevsky's works. The multiplicity of voices makes Dostoevsky develop a dialogic world in his works. The dialogism seems to be devoid of moral or religious judgements. Ksana Blank concludes the discussion that "The Rabbit and the Duck Theory" shows antagonistic ideas apparently separate but inwardly they exist because of each other. Dostoevsky does not seem to comment on the theology and philosophy of the truth that exists for each of his characters, but he retains the individuality of their voices. This is the core of polyphony in his novels.

Therefore, Ksana Blank's article, "The Rabbit and the Duck: Antinomic Unity in Dostoevskij, the Russian Religious Tradition, and Mikhail Bakhtin" (2007) provides a scholarly logical situatedness to my project through an intricate relation between Dostoevsky's approach in his works as an author and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism.

Bakhtin's theory explains Dostoevsky's authorial approach in a dialogic paradigm. The logical argumentation is explained by using Wittgenstein's depiction of Joseph Jastrow's complicated drawing. The article explicitly gives a logical situatedness to Bakhtin's theory and consequently contextualises my study in the present scholarship.

Gregory Phipps' article "Constructing Masks of Hyper masculinity: The Depiction of Rampage Shootings in Contemporary American Novels" (2015) investigates the factual reasons behind school shooting incidents (Phipps). It adds interesting information for further discussion in my project. The events of school shooting are different from "the violent activities of aggressive school boys' gangs" (Phipps 2). The gangs act differently from the individual act of shooting. The school shooting incidents create insecurity in the educational institutes of society. Academic culture is generally considered to be secure and violence free. It has a special impact on national psychology to see safe institutions turning into bloodshed yarns.

The insecurity in general academic atmosphere sparked after the Columbian school shooting event that happened in 1999 (Phipps 2, my paraphrase). The US government has taken several controlling measures to overcome such situation. Strategies have been made to counter the situations and diagnose their reasons that



cause such fatal incidents. There is not any single remedy suggested by experts that should be followed by media, law enforcing agencies and other stakeholders. An amalgam of various policies creates further ambiguities on the national scenario. The “social discourse” that is generated because of gun shooting incidents at academic institutions and their reaction in society is ambiguous (Phipps 2).

Modern fiction reflects the events of school shooting particularly through novels. These novels create ambiguity and confuse the national narrative on the issue. Gregory Phipps compares two novels on the topic of gun shooting in schools. One is Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and the other is Stephen King’s *Rage*. Gregory Phipps explains that the novels are similar in reflecting the brought-up stages of two future school shooters in their own respective social scenarios.

Gregory Phipps states that general media generated discourse links violent revengeful youth with shooting incidents. Children fiction, films, and games work together to make the youth insensitive and reactive. Due to mainstream crime fiction, youth starts fantasising violent revengeful behaviour as an outlet for their emotional and mental stress. Their innocence is taken away due to their unnecessary exposure to crime fiction. They find reclusiveness in an aggressive behaviour.

Thus, Gregory Phipps comments that the impact of general media creates an aggressive reaction in adolescent youth that is harmful for their future role in society. On contrary to this simplistic approach adopted by general print and electronic media, Lionel Shriver and Stephen King show different approaches in their novels towards the growth of such individual who can be a potential shooter in future (Phipps 2, my paraphrase).

These novels portray high school boys who internalise, reformulate and manipulate the very issues that media invokes when covering rampage school shooting. In standard media generated discourse, issues such as “masculinity and high school stratification contribute to simplistic narratives about school shootings, most of which revolve round that the perpetrator is an outcast suffering from the feelings of intense failure and emasculation” (Phipps 3).

Gregory Phipps distinguishes between the general media discourse about school shooting and the specific discourse generated by Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and Stephen King's *Rage*. Gregory Phipps comments that the development of persona in these novels gives us valuable insight. Firstly, Gregory Phipps relates the novelists' approach about school shooting who belonged to two different time periods. Phipps points out that the development of personas in two novels is based on each persona's personal experiences, within his own special circumstances. Thus, the protagonists in the novels like Kevin and Charlie grow into a false and shattered masculine ideal.

Gregory Phipps states how the two heroes are misled by their false vision of ideal manhood. Gregory Phipps' article seems to be investigating the cause and effect relation about the protagonist of gun shooter as a product of general social discourse around him. From this perspective the novels of Lionel Shriver and Stephen King become a significant evolutionary evidence on his way towards his findings.

Kevin and Charlie Decker also reject the media-hype created through vague narratives about school culture's environmental factors that might have contributed to the development of such characters. The shooters' characters also bring forward the realistic factors and their theoretical roots like the impact of individual traumas, failure of domestic culture, repressed emotions, internal self defence mechanism in case of adolescent identity crisis, traumatic parental relations, unfulfilled sibling goals, and cultural snobberies turning into false ideals. It is also significant that the article relates two different novels for the analysis of gun shooting.

Stephen King's *Rage* reflects the way he rejected the earliest approach in mainstream discourse of American society. Lionel Shriver reflects the latest fictional approach towards the phenomenon of emergence of a gun shooter from an ordinary academic environment. The article also helps to locate how the three novels focus on the deviations in parents' relations with the kids.

Phipps' article also suggests the sexual desires that turn into social ideals and are kept back by the personas in the form of masks that reveal their excessive emotions at the carnivalesque moment. The gun shooter persona views his failures through the flashing lights of media after the carnivalesque moment is released. Ironically in all the

three novels the reality just storms the moment and the real identity of the shooter is revealed to be just the opposite of what has been fanaticised by the dreaming persona. Mask also reveals the difference between the reality and the fantasy of the characters. Vernon Little happens to be a real-life survivor. After the gun shooting in DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, Jesus Navarro's carnivalesque moment is revealed. Kevin fails to accept the moment of truth when the flashes of media are off and he is identified as a murderer rather than a masculine ideal. Stephen King's persona Charlie Decker reveals his oedipal complexes just before he shoots his school mates.

So, the Gregory Phipps' article, "Constructing Masks of Hypermasculinity: The Depiction of Rampage Shootings in Contemporary American Novels" (2015) gives a glimpse of the reflection of school shooter in popular American fiction and gives situatedness to the project in contemporary scholarship. It also compares this gun shooter protagonist, developed through media, to the concept of gun shooter in video games, newspapers, and movies. It develops the critical background insight for my project through differentiating the general image of mass shooter adolescent youth in mass media and its realist reflection in Lionel Shriver and Stephen King's novel. Therefore, Gregory Phipps article helps in many ways in contextualising my project.

Firstly, Gregory Phipps' article has the selection of novels that relates closely to the selection of novels for the project. Phipps article discusses Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and Stephen King's *Rage*. Similarly, the project also discusses two novels, one is Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and the other is DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. Though the overall theoretical framework, research objectives, and textual analysis of Gregory Phipps' article is quite diversified from my project, yet certain similarities can be identified that help discover the gaps in existing knowledge and signify the analytical dimensions of my dissertation.

Secondly, Phipps' article stresses the need to discover the individuality of approach by Lionel Shriver and Stephen King towards the growth of gun shooters and its evolutionary process in the specific American socio-cultural settings. The project also views the gun shooter persona through the investigative perspective from its own specific framework and lens.

In the study Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque provides framework to analyse the masked part of Vernon Little and Kevin's personality as potential gun shooters. These structurally intersecting points between Gregory Phipps' article and my project help locate the significance of my project within the contemporary knowledge in my area. It also contextualizes the project by providing the relevant background.

There are certain gaps identified in the Gregory Phipps' article. It narrows down the research on the development of protagonist's personality and does not relate it dialogically to the broader spectrum of socio-cultural background of American society. It also says nothing about the multiplicity of voices and consciousnesses in the novels of Stephen King and particularly about Lionel Shriver's novel.

This blank area is taken up by the project through polyphony and heteroglossia. Gregory Phipps' article depicts almost no dialogic relation between the individual at the threshold of social destruction and the world around him. This void is taken up in my project through dialogic relation between the individual and his world. Therefore, Phipps' article contextualises the study in the existing knowledge and helps identify the gaps that are being taken up by the thesis.

Rocco Capozzi's article, "Palimpsests and Laughter: The Dialogic Pleasure of Unlimited Intertextuality in *The Name of the Rose*" (1989) relates to the project significantly. *The Name of the Rose* is the first bestseller novel of Umberto Eco (Capozzi 412). Capozzi comments that *The Name of the Rose* is a literary expression of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of novel as a "developing genre" and as a "literary hybrid". It comprises multiple narratives and multiple texts. The diversity of texts within one novel, makes it difficult to decide its genre. As an aesthetic text *The Name of the Rose* is a challenge for the abilities of its writer as well as its reader. It is a challenge for the reader to trace the variety of references in the Umberto Eco's writing style.

There are unlimited traces and allusions to other scholarly, literary, historical, cultural and social texts, belonging to different eras. Rocco Capozzi quotes Bakhtin: "novel permits the incorporation of various genres both artistic and extra artistic" (Capozzi 412). Ironically the writer's style with playing a vast field of scholarly writings in his text would become meaningless if the reader focusses on locating the

sources and identifying the references. Eco states that he wanted his reader to enjoy his writing style (Postscript 59, my paraphrase). Eco states that laughter is the essence of comedy. Capozzi quotes Umberto Eco: signs and languages are no longer exclusively human features. Ethnology demonstrates that other animals also use reason and language, so the only difference is laughter. Laughter is a metaphysical and mysterious mechanism. Umberto Eco also calls his novel a literary journey (Capozzi 415).

Rocco Capozzi's article, "Palimpsests and Laughter: The Dialogic Pleasure of Unlimited Intertextuality in *The Name of the Rose*" (1989) contextualises the project as a study of intertextuality in Umberto Eco's, *The Name of the Rose*. In the project an important aspect of my framework is to study the intertextuality or heteroglossia in my primary texts: Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. Rocco Capozzi based his theoretical framework for the study on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The project's theoretical framework is also based on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Capozzi gave intricate detail of Eco's work as "a collage of textual styles" and "a mosaic of literary narratives". This aspect of the article contextualises my project's study of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* as heteroglot texts.

Rocco Capozzi's article, "Palimpsests and Laughter: The Dialogic Pleasure of Unlimited Intertextuality in *The Name of the Rose*" (1989) situates my project in contemporary critical knowledge of my area due to its focus on "pleasure" and "laughter". The project also studies Bakhtin's term "carnavalesque" in both the texts. I analyse DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* as a comic text producing pleasure through its intertextuality, and "carnavalesque." There is intricate detail that brings the carnivalesque and laughter interrelated to each other.

The similarity of inter-relationship connects both the projects. Thus, Rocco Capozzi's study situates the project in the contemporary scholarship. However, there are certain gaps in Rocco Capozzi's study. For instance, there seems to be a stress on the use of scholarly language and references. *The Name of the Rose* is not analysed in content for the study of intertextuality or heteroglossia. This gap is taken up in the project where I study heteroglossia with reference to the textual style with textual examples, making the analysis relevant, and meaningfully related to the framework.

Gabrielle McIntire's article "Heteroglossia, Monologism, and Fascism: Bernard Reads *The Waves* (2005) is closely related to the project as a study of a modern text of *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. Gabrielle McIntire studies *The Waves* as a critical text on fascism and gender inequality. Virginia Woolf suggests fascism in *The Waves* through her alternate narrative mode switching from monologist to heteroglot.

McIntire quotes A.J.P Taylor to say that *The Waves* was published at a historical time when England and Europe were just at the verge of World War II. Virginia Woolf portrays the last conversation of six characters of *The Waves* in such a way that the narrative style becomes a critique of imperialism and patriarchy. The historical time frame of the publication of *The Waves* in 1931 coincides with its narrative style and suggestive content. Virginia Woolf writes in *Three Guineas* that she was obsessed to write against fascism. Virginia Woolf criticises fascism through her discursive narrative style by switching between heteroglossia and Monologism (McIntire 31, my paraphrase).

Virginia Woolf criticises fascism through the expression of physical violence in *The Waves* as well as through her specific speech and language (McIntire 31). In the last fifty pages of the novel Bernard's voice replaces all the other voices. The plurality of voices is reduced to a monotone, single voiced narrative. Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* declares it as a "reductive feature of the text to converge from multiple voices to a single voice" (Bakhtin 83). This reduction in narration expresses criticism of fascism where the underlying violence urges the plurality of voices to be dominated and silenced by a single authoritative voice.

Virginia Woolf also relates to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in her text. It is through her use of conversation technique. The family members speak to each other in *The Waves*, but no one responds directly to each other. Apparently, it seems that the characters speak in isolation, without responding to each other. In his book *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin calls this phenomenon "family jargon" (McIntire 32). There are several persons speaking and then the voices converge into Bernard's soliloquy. Thus, Woolf avoids polyphony and juxtaposes Monologism and heteroglossia by using soliloquy and conversation (McIntire 33, my paraphrase).

Gabrielle McIntire's article "Heteroglossia, Monologism and Fascism: Bernard Reads *The Waves* (2005) situates my project in the contemporary critical knowledge as a study of a modern text from the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. *The Waves* comprises a specific use of speech and language. McIntire's study relates Virginia Woolf's ideological critique of fascism through textual narrative.

The project also shows ideological critique of violence through narrative technique. Gabrielle McIntire's article also contextualises my project as critical study of novel as a genre through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. However, there are certain gaps in McIntire's study, for instance there is no reference to Bakhtin's term of polyphony while the voices are discussed. The dialogism is not explored in the text as a critique of patriarchy in the text, in detail. These gaps are taken up in this project.

Brian Crews' article, "Tradition, Heteroglossia, and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*" is a significant publication for the project from the perspective of enormous intertextuality and heteroglossia. The article discovers the established feature of intertextuality in T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland* from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Brian Crew explains that the poem *The Wasteland* is a modernist verse as it contains multiplicity of voices and texts. The variety of discourse is thus generated within a common space of poetic rhythm. The interesting aspect of the shift of poetry from the conventional single tone of the monoglot poetry towards a polyglot poetry is discussed.

Brian crew relates this development to Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism in terms of "novelisation of the other genres." Monologue is also considered a developmental step towards this novelisation of the genres. This monologist aspect in different genres further develops into dialogism. Similarly, the objective meaning of the poet's uniform voice splits into the subjective meaning of multiple voices of different characters of a poem.

The varieties of voices appeared in all genres and diffuse the distinct sense of genres. Brian Crew smartly relates this phenomenon to the modernisation process that was finally termed as postmodernism. This evolutionary process of poetry and novel moves simultaneously as well as complements each other.

The nostalgic feelings towards past, historical time, and tradition appear in T.S Eliot's poetry. Brian Crew logically relates this feeling of tradition in T.S. Eliot's poetry, on one hand to the novelisation of poetry in terms of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and on the other hand to the postmodernism. The fragmented nature of discourse in *The Wasteland* is a kind of intertextuality that bridges the gap between the sense of past and present. Various kinds of voices that speak in the poem are related to different times in past, present, and distant past. The distance between past and distant past is linked through the absence of the poet's authorial voice.

This renewal of past through multiple consciousness of present in T.S Eliot's poetry appreciates Bakhtin's concept of variety of perspectives. From the lens of Bakhtin's Dialogism, T.S Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland* shows a kind of intermingling of various discourses from different eras of time and forms a hybridisation of perspectives and voices, thus bringing forth a merger of time. It highlights nostalgia of modern life with past and it also merges it. The heteroglot texture of this poem anticipates the modern form of heteroglossia in the genre of novel. It establishes the fact that heteroglossia can bring meaning to the contemporary void of meaning in literature.

T.S Eliot's belief in the existence of meaning in intertextuality is expressed through his skilful use of heteroglossia. The linear discourse of monoglot world lost meaning as soon as it landed into the postmodern era; however, the fission of individual voices in a single text worked like a string of order from past tradition that endowed meanings to the fragmented reality of present.

Thus, heteroglossia is the means of reproducing tradition in T.S Eliot's poetry. Different kinds of texts from history are brought into the single text as a form of multiple voices. Multiple personas are created to speak in these multiple voices. Consequently, a fabric of different texts is spoken by different personas is created. This fabricated text is the world of heteroglot narratives. These narratives express tradition of the past. Tradition is brought to present through this depersonalisation of poet's voice and personalisation of individual voices from the distant past.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, this kind of linkage between two entities of past and present is a sort of dialogism. Bakhtin discussed that dialogism is a feature of



novelisation of genres and it is done through heteroglossia. Hence T. S Eliot's poetry is dialogic in this sense and tradition is brought back to present through the usage of heteroglossia. Thus, when this feature of T.S Eliot's poetry is juxtaposed with the main thought stream of my project, it appears that this analysis is partially applicable to the Dialogism in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The tradition of carnival is recreated in the contemporary drama of life. The multiplicity of voices echoes in the carnivalesque scene.

Heteroglossia in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a source of recreating the traditional element of the scene of carnivalesque. At this point, the difference between T.S Eliot's use of tradition and Lionel Shriver's use of tradition is that Eliot recreated tradition through a mingling of voices from both past and present. Lionel Shriver recreated carnivalesque in the form of a relic from past through multiplicity of the consciousness speaking from contemporary world.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

During the review of various secondary sources, I found that there is hardly any secondary source available that addresses the project's theoretical framework and my selected texts. However, there are several books, journal articles, and newspaper articles that partially relate to some aspect of the study in a significant way. I have kept in view the fragments of theoretical framework while selecting the secondary sources to be reviewed so that each review relates to some dimension of my paper meaningfully and leads to some significant findings. In this chapter, I have reviewed different secondary sources to find out the gaps in the contemporary critical corpus. The dissertation fills these gaps through my own textual analysis based on the theoretical framework for the study. These secondary sources also help in contextualising my dissertation within the existing scholarship. In the forthcoming chapter, I have discussed the theoretical framework and research methodology of the study.

## CHAPTER 3

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

I have applied Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism to two selected novels, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. I have applied qualitative research method in the study and used textual analysis as research method. Though I have principally focussed on Bakhtin's Dialogism, I have tried to move the analysis to its ingredients like polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque. Dialogism is basically an umbrella term while polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque are its parts. So, I have focussed on moving from the blanket term to its ingredients. The development of the project has been a movement from order to disorder or from dialogic cohesiveness to carnivalesque chaos. I have explained the theoretical framework and textual analysis in detail in the forthcoming discussion.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

I have designed the theoretical framework basically from Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* along with his other two books *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In these books, Mikhail Bakhtin provides the basic theory and explanation of the terms of dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque. The key concept in the project is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism, with focus on Bakhtin's terms of polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque. Here, I shall explain these terms from the perspective of the study's theoretical framework. Dialogism is the key term for understanding Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts. It is the core of his philosophy that helps me design my theoretical framework to find answers to my research questions. Dialogism is like a key function in the dynamics of discourse that is connected automatically to his other concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony, and carnivalesque.

It is significant for the theoretical framework to refer to the core concept of dialogue in a systemic way, the way Mikhail Bakhtin defines it, to bring home the idea in its thematic capacity, intensity, and originality. For Bakhtin, the novelistic discourse and dialogism are inevitably connected ideas.

The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse. On all its various routes towards the object, in all its directions, the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction. (Bakhtin 1981: 279)

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, defines “word” as a unit of dialogism, in chapter entitled “Discourse in Novel”:

The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way. (Bakhtin 1981 :279)

Bakhtin’s concept of internal dialogism of the word puts every word in direct interaction with every other word. This interaction may develop a conflict or a resolution; it ends consequently into a rhythm of language. This rhythm of language or languages, juxtaposing each other, arises from the internal dialogism of a word. The same rhythm of internal dialogism is heard by the writer of the novel in the form of polyphony and is expressed on a methodological plane in the form of diverse languages or heteroglossia. This is how the key concepts emerge from an axis of dialogism of a single utterance or a word. This internal dialogism functions at a subtly complex level to shape language and its style. Bakhtin holds:

Dialogue is studied merely as a compositional form in the structuring of speech but the internal dialogism of the word (dialogism which occurs in a monologic utterance as well as in a rejoinder) the dialogism that penetrates its entire structure, all its semantic and expressive layers, is almost entirely ignored. It is precisely this internal dialogism of the word that has enormous power to shape style. (Bakhtin 1981: 279)

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, defines heteroglossia as one's speech that speaks for the author's refracted intentions. This type of dialogue serves two voices and two intentions. One voice speaks for the speaker and the other for the author. Bakhtin writes:

Heteroglossia once incorporated into novel, is one's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of "double-voiced discourse". It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions. In such discourse, there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated. They know about each other, it is as if they hold a conversation with each other. (Bakhtin 1981: 324)

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, discussed Dostoevsky's narratives in detail. In the theoretical framework, I have based the project for Bakhtin's term of polyphony, as described in the first chapter, entitled "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature". Bakhtin considers that polyphonic novel is a literary contribution by Dostoevsky. He is the original narrator of this style in novel. Dostoevsky is the creator of a polyphonic novel, a new novelistic genre (Bakhtin 1984: 7).

In Dostoevsky's novel, dialogism is key narrative element. Bakhtin explores dialogue of a unique kind in his work. This dialogism is due to multiplicity of consciousnesses. There is a unique kind of conversation among these consciousnesses. Bakhtin defines dialogism in Dostoevsky's novels in the following way:

In Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel we are dealing not with ordinary dialogic form...but here we are dealing with an ultimate dialogicity.... Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as a whole of single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses into it as objects, but formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object of the other. (Bakhtin 1981 :18)

Regarding the detail of absorption of consciousnesses into one, Bakhtin has used the concept of centripetal and centrifugal forces to explain dialogism. The pressing down of plurality into a single consciousness is described as a centripetal force that subdues the voices into one single voice. While emergence of independent consciousnesses is due to a centrifugal force that liberates the consciousnesses. Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky's style in novel helps us understand his concept of dialogism and polyphony from many aspects. One aspect of dialogism is that the characters in the novels are independent to speak against or parallel to the author's voice. The character exists fully alive, with his own consciousness. His voice and opinion is not subordinated by the author's voice. The existence of this feature in novels urges Bakhtin to declare that "Dostoevsky's world is profoundly pluralistic" (Bakhtin 1984: 26).

Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novels determines his concept of polyphony and dialogism to be inherently inter-related. When a novel comprises plurality, it gives rise to various micro worlds. Each micro world has its own consciousness, freedom to voice its opinion, and interact with the other worlds around. This mutual interaction is the feature that enables Bakhtin to co-relate polyphony and dialogism. The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through (Bakhtin 1984:40). Here Bakhtin seems to suggest that polyphony and dialogism are mutually dependent terms.

Bakhtin quotes Kaus to describe the background of Dostoevsky's style. Kaus explained polyphonic world as a reaction to the breakdown of monarchy by capitalism. For him, "One single monotone world broke away into tiny worlds that dispersed away with the wind following new ideologies or sustaining the earlier ones" (Bakhtin 1984: 19). This phenomenon is described in Dostoevsky's style. Bakhtin states, "the epoch itself made the polyphonic novel possible" (Bakhtin 1984: 27). The multiplicity of consciousnesses appeared in the form of voices. Bakhtin states that Dostoevsky was capturing these voices and whisperings. He was creating dialogue out of these voices that he heard:

Dostoevsky's gift of being able to hear all voices immediately and simultaneously permitted him to create polyphonic novel (Bakhtin 1984: 30). Dostoevsky could hear dialogic relationships everywhere; where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well...he structured the novel as a great dialogue (Bakhtin1984: 40).

Bakhtin appreciates Dostoevsky's polyphony as a communication among consciousnesses. Dostoevsky's polyphony is exactly what happens between consciousnesses, their interaction, and interdependence (Bakhtin 1984: 36).

Bakhtin differentiates between drama and novel as two different genres that differ in the reflection of polyphony. Drama can never be truly polyphonic. In a single act of drama one voice dominates and speaks. This is against the spirit of polyphony. Bakhtin rejects Shakespeare's plays as an example of monologist discourse. Polyphony can play havoc in drama and is against the basic rules of drama as genre. Bakhtin considers novel a diverse genre than drama. Novel can exhibit polyphony and dialogism:

Dostoevsky alone can be considered the creator of genuine polyphony. Drama by its very nature cannot be polyphonic. Though it can be multi-levelled. In Shakespeare, each play contains only one full valid voice, the voice of the hero while polyphony means a plurality of fully valid voices within a single work. (Bakhtin1984: 34)

On the contrary, Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque is related to Shakespeare's plays, as Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World*: "Shakespeare's drama has many outward carnivalesque aspects, images of the lower bodily stratum, ambivalent obscenities, and popular banquet scenes" (Bakhtin 2004: 275). It is in order to remind my reader that I have already discussed T.S Eliot's idea of tradition with reference to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque on page 33.

Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque is profoundly rooted in his interest for folk culture. Bakhtin's ideology of dialogism is connected to his ideas of carnivalesque because of his interest in culture. Bakhtin sees phenomenon of carnivalesque as an expression of culture and thinks it as essential for human life as language. Krystyna Pomorska in foreword to *Rabelais and His World* writes that after Russian revolution

certain kind of satire and irony was banned by the government. As a reaction to this denial of laughter in society by the authorities, Bakhtin and Rabelais promoted laughter in society (Bakhtin 2004: X).

Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque is different from carnival. Carnival is a kind of festive occasion while carnivalesque is a complex phenomenon. Michael Holquist in foreword to *Rabelais and His World* writes: "Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque is beyond the simple meaning of festivity as a ritual. It is rooted into his zest for the spirit of common man against all monarchy: carnival laughter builds its own world in opposition to the official world" (Bakhtin 2004: 88). Bakhtin locates the historical evolution of carnivalesque in society and writes "the influence of carnival was great during all periods of literary development." The renaissance is a direct carnivalization of human consciousness, philosophy, and literature. Carnival exists at the base of popular renaissance literature (Bakhtin 2004: 274).

Bakhtin explains carnivalesque from the perspective of common man's freedom, as a primitive ritual, and as a cultural expression. His simplest description of carnival is in terms of feast as follows:

The feast is a primary indestructible element of human civilization; it may become sterile and even degenerate, but it cannot vanish. The feast has no utilitarian connotation, on the contrary, feast means liberation from all that is utilitarian. It is a temporary transfer to the utopian world. (Bakhtin 2004: 276)

In the next sub heading, I have explained the research methodology.

### **3.3 Research Methodology**

The research methodology for my project is qualitative in nature. John W. Creswell, and John D. Creswell, in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods*, define qualitative research as an approach used to know meaning of "an entity, problem or artifact," given by human beings (Creswell 4). In qualitative research method, questions and procedures are searched, data is collected in a setting and analysis is based on inductivism. The focus is on writing a report that is not fixed or based on absolute interpretations. "Qualitative approach is a significant research method for the study of human behavior" (Kothari 3). Motivation research and association research are important methods of qualitative approach that help

researchers in assessing the motivation of their agents or actors who are human beings. David Nunan, in his book *Research Methods in Language Learning*, states that Qualitative research is based on qualitative methods grounded within the individual's own context. Popper gave his falsificationist principle which states that while we can never conclusively demonstrate truth through induction, we can falsify an insertion through documentation of a single disconfirming instance (Nunan 13). The logical conclusion would be that all knowledge is tentative and in fact, absolute truth is an ideal which can never be attained (Nunan 13).

Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow's *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* introduce interpretive research design to the reader as a research design. Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow define the interpretive research design as a meaning making process. The main objective of meaning making in the interpretive research design is to know the process by which different individuals make meaning of their world. This meaning making process is related to contextuality. Hence in the interpretive approach "contextuality" is important than "generalizability" (Schwartz -Shea and Yanow 11).

The research design of my project is interpretive and exploratory. In the interpretive Research Design human beings are taken as active sources who design their social, political, and technological surrounding. They change their physical and mental environment by the process of meaning making in their context. For the interpretive researcher, the question of contextualisation is significant than generalization (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 48). Exploratory research is a kind of Qualitative Approach in research. The main aim of exploratory research is not the testing of a hypothesis. In this kind of research, hypothesis is formulated (Kothari 3).

### **3.4 Textual Analysis as Research Method**

I have used Textual Analysis as a principle research method for my project. Gabriele Griffin explains research methods in *Research Methods for English Studies* that "they are the techniques for handling material" and "the choice of method depends on the kind of research one wants to conduct" (Griffin 3). Catherine Belsey discusses Textual analysis as a research method in her essay "Textual Analysis as a Research Method".



Catherine Belsey quotes in the *Research Methods for English Studies*, “the text sets the agenda for the research” (Belsey in Graffin 167). Textual analysis is suitable for my project as Belsey says, “the textual analysis is indispensable for research in cultural criticism that includes English, cultural history and cultural studies” (Belsey in Graffin 157). The textual analysis unfolds the research questions and provides multiple interpretations of the text to the researcher as Catherine Belsey comments, “the textual analysis sets core questions that are answered in the research” (Belsey 157).

In exploratory research, the textual analysis method is productive as it gives the researcher the avenue for variety of interpretations and perceptions. Belsey defines Interpretation as a relation between the reader and the text. The dynamics of textual analysis by Catherine Belsey provide the research method for my project. The core philosophy applied to the primary texts in my project is Bakhtin’s dialogism. Catherine Belsey admits in her essay “Textual analysis as a Research Method” the inevitability of the dialogic relations as she states, “there may be a dialogue within a text but the text itself also engages in dialogue with the reader” (Belsey in Graffin 163). Hence it supports my project design, as a research method, based on Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism.

Belsey explains mutual relation of text and dialogue. Catherine quotes Barthes, “The text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue” (Belsey in Graffin 162). There is no single meaning; Catherine Belsey quotes Jacques Derrida, “meaning is inevitably plural” (Belsey in Graffin 164). The dimensions of the theory of textual analysis as a research method for qualitative research method, relates to my theoretical framework and signifies the logical ties between my theoretical framework and research methodology, as Belsey quotes, “the utterances are plural” hence the meaning would be plural. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism defines plurality of utterances as “polyphony” and relates plurality of meaning to polyphony (Andrew 39).

Coming back to Catherine Belsey, this plurality of meaning raises questions and in cultural criticism, inquisitiveness incorporates open-endedness and undecidability of meaning. In textual analysis, the researcher doesn’t end with definite conclusion. Catherine Belsey in her argument of textual analysis quotes Barthes that “a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into

mutual relations of dialogues” (Griffin 162). So, it can be stated that “there cannot be a final signified...and one reading that would guarantee closure is not an option” (Belsey in Griffin 167). So, the resolution of this thesis would surely be open to further investigation.

For the sake of clarity, specifications of Catherine Belsey’s textual analysis that guide my study are as follow:

1. Textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on the text. (Belsey in Graffin 157)
2. Research is expected to make a difference to the standard account of topic, whatever that topic might be. (Belsey in Graffin 160)
3. A good textual analyst would be aware of the text’s requirements on us but the same good analyst would also acknowledge that we might deliberately refuse the position the text offers, might choose to look at it from somewhere else. (Belsey in Graffin 165)
4. There may be a dialogue within a text but the text itself also engages in dialogue with the reader. (Belsey in Graffin 163)
5. Engaged in dialogue the textual analyst retains certain independence. (Belsey in Graffin 163)
6. If we maintain a sense of a dialogue between what we bring and what we find, the reading that results is likely to make sense to other people, to be admissible at least in the end as interpretation, and not as free association. (Belsey in Graffin 166)
7. In principle, my idea is that the text has the priority; ideally the text sets the agenda. (Belsey in Graffin 167)
8. Any specific textual analysis is made at a particular historical moment and from within a specific culture. In that sense the analysis is not exhaustive. It does not embrace all possible readings, past and future. At the same time it is able to be new. (Belsey in Graffin 166)
9. Textual analysis itself poses the questions that are taken up by the researcher. The reverse process tends to distort the text. (Belsey in Graffin 169)

10. According to the theory of textuality I have drawn on, a text is made up of multiple writings, entering into mutual relations, including relations of contestations. (Belsey in Graffin 172)
11. According to the theory of language I have invoked, there can never be a final signified, no one true meaning can be invoked. (Belsey in Graffin 162)
12. In textual analysis as a research method, no one true meaning can ever come to light. Although it remains an object of desire in all intellectual endeavour, the definitive truth is not available now or at any time. (Belsey in Graffin 173)
13. A textual analyst does not have to make up his mind for a final meaning. (Belsey in Graffin 173)
14. An object of equal desire for all good cultural critics, the one proper meaning, the reading that would guarantee closure is not an option. (Belsey in Graffin 173)
15. Meaning is not anchored in anything outside signification itself, and the signifying process supplants it. (Belsey in Graffin 173)
16. All we can be sure of, in other words, is the signifier and this cannot be tied to any unique reading to end all reading. On the contrary, Meanings are always ultimately undecidable. (Belsey in Graffin 173)

### 3.5 Conclusion

The core concepts of my theoretical framework, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, are heteroglossia, polyphony, and carnivalesque. These concepts are inter-related and inter-dependent. These key concepts together make a matrix that needs a coherent and unified approach in textual analysis. It is also evident from above discussion that Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque are flexible and complex terms that may not be exhausted fully from the theoretical framework of a single project.

Therefore, I would explore these terms of Textual analysis by Catherine Belsey from my own perspective, based on the theoretical framework and find answers to the research questions. In the forthcoming Chapter, I have analyzed Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by employing Bakhtin's dialogism as conceptual framework and Catherine Belsey's "Research Method as Textual Analysis" as my research method.

## CHAPTER 4

### A DIALOGIC STUDY OF SILENCE IN LIONEL SHRIVER'S *WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN*

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the text of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* using the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. I have used Bakhtin's theorizing in terms of intertextuality, polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque to explore Lionel Shriver's text.

Lionel Shriver, the author of one of my selected texts, is a journalist and writer. She was born in 1957 in North Carolina, America. When she was fifteen years old, she changed her name from Margaret Ann Shriver to Lionel Shriver. After getting MFA degree from Columbia University, she has been living in Nairobi, Bangkok, Belfast and London. Lionel Shriver's first novel was *The Female of the Species*. It was published in 1986, when Shriver was 29 years old. *The Checker and Derailleurs* was her second book, published in 1987. Her later books include, *Ordinary Decent Criminals*, *Game Control* and *Double Fault*. Thus in 2003 her Booker Prize Winner writing *We Need to Talk about Kevin* was published.

Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* comprises core issues wrapped skilfully within the writing style. The key terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory unwrap the subtle mutual bonding of various issues, taken up by the writer and explores the dynamic correlation of one strand of the dialogic world to another. My approach towards the textual analysis using Bakhtin's lens is simple and logical. I find the text and the theoretical lens aptly compatible to each other to find answers to my research questions. Firstly, both the text and the theory revolve around certain dialogue. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism assumes that dialogue is a core phenomenon for everything around us in this world. While on the other side of the equation, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a dialogic text from its title to its narrative style and the thematic approach.

Hence, as far as dialogue is concerned both the theory and the text are complementing each other. I have applied Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as Research Method" to the dissertation. Catherine Belsey explains the relation between reader and the text. Since, Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism is my framework for qualitative research, Catherine Belsey's research method for textual analysis suits the project: "There may be dialogue within a text, but the text itself also engages in dialogue with the reader" (Griffin 166). In the forthcoming pages, I have analysed Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by applying Bakhtin's theorizing and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis as the research method. In the forthcoming discussion, I analyse the text under the following sub-headings:

- Listening to the Voices
- Heteroglossia
- Lets' play William Tell
- Mumsey....the Mommy's Monster
- Celia's Glass Eye
- Thursday Carnival at Archery
- Unmasking the Shooter
- Conclusion

## **4.2 Listening to the Voices**

Eva, as a narrator, speaks in poetic language and murmuring tone. The polyphonic quality of the text lies in Shriver's skill as a writer to establish the identity of all the other voices in reader's mind. The basic dialogic structure of the text is that Eva is talking to her late husband Franklin through written script in the form of letters. The uniqueness of the text from the perspective of polyphony lies in the fact that Eva is talking to a dead listener. Her husband, Franklin, is no more. Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* writes: "Language about the dead is stylistically quite different from the language about the living" (Bakhtin 1981: 20).

Eva's voice echoes back to the reader because of the absence of the addressee. It gives a grim intensity to the narrator's voice that she is talking to her husband, after his death. The whole script moves in a numbly traumatic tone that varies in intensity and mood. The bitterness of the tragic event looms in an invisible gloomy backdrop.

The same effect resonates in a grimly sad tone in polyphonic matrix of Lionel Shriver's text. Franklin, as a dead listener, is a distant audience for Eva's voice as a narrator. The strength of the dialogic relation emerges due to the distance between the speaker and the listener, as Caryl Emerson in his book, *All the Same the Words Don't Go Away* writes about the effectiveness of the polyphony that distance is an effective parameter for the addressed persona. Distance makes the dialogic relations meaningfully effective in relation to "the addressed codes, words, and social entities" (Emerson 12).

From the perspective of dialogism, the intersection of time and space for every dialogue is significant. It is particularly important to relate the time factor with the polyphonic aspect of the text. In case of Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* the symphony of voices displays a musical rhythm due to its oscillation between past and present. Eva speaks near reader's ear. Her tone varies from whispering to normal, at various times.

Eva and Kevin speak to us from within Eva's mind. Both have ideological differences, with each other, rooted deep into their existence. The polyphonic aspect of the text lets us analyse their version of every situation, independently. Eva, despite being the narrator of the text fails to justify her position as a parent. Her long brooding over Americanism as well as her analytical rhetoric about life is complex and distracting from the mainstream plot.

As compared to the other characters, Eva speaks in long argumentative way. It contrasts with the speech of Franklin and Kevin. Eva's philosophical narrative diverts reader's attention from her. It seems as if the narrator's difficult dialogue sounds heavy and dismantles the impact of her rhetoric as Thomas H. Schmid discusses in the article, "Pastoral Dialogism in Keats' *Ode on A Grecian Urn*": "the speaker becomes "excessively complex" about something that is really rather simple in philosophising the matter" (Schmid 82). According to Bakhtin's dialogism, Shriver's narrative style sparkles because of this polyphonic feature that Kevin and Franklin's voice can be heard and felt despite Eva's long brooding. Kevin's aggressive dialogism fails to overshadow others' feelings about him.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin states another feature of polyphonic novel: "Dostoevsky's gift of hearing and understanding all voices simultaneously also allowed him to create the polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 1984:30). Lionel Shriver enables his reader to listen to all kind of voices on micro level. It creates microdialogue as well as strengthens the polyphony. Shriver enables the reader to listen to the mumbling and cooing of Kevin as an infant. His early voices of infancy can be heard clearly by the reader.

There are rhymes, songs, and games for the infant Kevin that amuse the reader. So, voices vary due to their speaker's varying age, perception, position, and location. It happens because of Shriver's ability to hear the voices musically and reproduce them. Peter Westergaard in his article "Towards A Twelve-Tone Polyphony" relates the musical significance of polyphony and points out that polyphony means: "to comprehend other people's music or to make my own music comprehensible to other people" (Westergaard 90).

Lionel Shriver listens to the music of words in others' speeches and produces them in the text. Eva argues with her husband about the surname of their child. Franklin wants it to be "Plaskitt" because his own name is Franklin Plaskitt. During the argument they reproduce the name in various accents and languages. Lionel Shriver reproduces the musical effect of both names: Khatchadourian and Plaskitt. Eva remembers their discussion on their child's name: "You cannot possibly be proposing that I name my son Garabet Plaskitt". "Nnoo" I said Garabet Kutchadourian. Has more of a ring" (Shriver 70). Similarly, she reproduces the musical utterances of Kevin's infant voices. Every individual voice in the text can be heard and felt individually, in its background, with its consciousness. This impact is revealed when she talks about her forefathers' historical background: "My father was born in Dier-Ez-Zor concentration camp...My forefathers were systematically exterminated and no one ever talks about it Franklin (Shriver 70)". There is plurality of voices and each voice has its own impact and identity. The impact and location of one voice does not reduce the impact of other voices in the novel as in the article "Dialogism and Bakhtin's Theory of Culture": "the dialogic novel is a constructed whole because no one voice is its decisive voice" (Shevtsova 753).

As far as the dialogic aspect of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* concerned, it makes the basic polyphonic structure of the text. The frequency of realistic dialogue between the characters induces polyphony and reduces monologic tone of the novel. Monologue reduces the capacity of characters to assert their own voice and identity, while in independent dialogue the individual identity of the speaker is maintained. In his article “Problems of Bakhtin’s Theory about Polyphony” Qian Zhongwen asserts that monologic discourse ignores the subjectivity of personas in the text. Bakhtin stated that polyphony comprises dialogue as its essential ingredient (Zhongwen 780).

The basic structure of Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is dialogic in nature. Eva addresses her late husband in her letters in long narrative, comprising multiple dialogues between different individuals. The argumentative quality of dialogue displays conflicts, internal dialogue, “double-voicedness”, and micro-dialogues. Polyphony establishes because every individual speaks in his own voice, tone and sound impact, representing his own consciousness with the persons, environment and the world around. Every individual produces his own text, comprising text from variety of sources. For Instance Eva speaks about her concept of motherhood and images pour into the readers’ mind invoking polyphony and intertextuality:

In Mimic a woman gives birth to a two-foot Maggot. Later the X files turned bug-eyed aliens bursting gorily from human midsections into a running theme. In horror and sci-fi, the host is consumed or rent, reduced to husk or residue so that some nightmare creature may survive its shell. (Shriver 70)

This diversity of speech makes the text heteroglot. Polyphony and heteroglossia make the dialogic relations evidently dramatic and show them moving towards their climax. The climax event in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is the mass shooting of schoolmates by Kevin. The killing episode emerges as a carnival of death that contains grotesque imagery and violent dialogism between Kevin and his world.

“Microdialogue” is the dialogue that generates a contest between meanings. As Meyler states in her article that in microdialogue “dialogism is not on the level of events but inside every word” (Meyler 108). Bakhtin himself defined microdialogue in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*: “dialogue has penetrated inside every word,



provoking it in a battle and the interruption of one voice by another” (Bakhtin 1984: 75). There is dialogic realm around every word, but few words gather multiple and refracted meaning from many dimensions. Kevin calls Eva “Mumsey” (Shriver 48). The word “Mumsey” initiates plurality of meaning in the relationship of Eva and Kevin. There is microdialogue around the word “Mumsey.” The relationship seems to be perverted in many ways. “Mumsey” seems to be an alarming one-word voice note on the situation. Kevin reveals his inclination towards crossing boundaries. Eva feels terrified while on the other hand, Kevin says that he hates his mother (Shriver 51).

### 4.3 Heteroglossia

Bakhtin elaborates various intricate aspects of the dialogue in the form of concepts like heteroglossia, carnivalesque, and polyphony. In simple words, if everything is in a dynamic relation of dialogue, then heteroglossia helps us decode who is talking in whose speech; Bakhtin writes in *the Dialogic Imagination* that heteroglossia provides background and imagery to “the dialogizing” persons in the novel. Heteroglossia adds a “special resonance” to the discourse in the novel by its material background impact for the dialogue (Bakhtin 1981: 332).

In line with my theoretical framework, heteroglossia is a key term for the textual analysis of Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as one individual’s speech into another’s dialogue and it is a kind of “double-voiced discourse”. Now referring to dialogue, it requires two entities to be engaged in a dialogic relation. Heteroglossia emerges when these entities in a dialogic relation containing other’s text or speech. When both the terms are taken as lens and applied to analyse Lionel Shriver’s text, it seems that the text is depicting a different kind of dialogic world.

Catherine Belsey in her approach towards textual analysis stresses on the use of key terms that help the qualitative analyst of the text in taking his own position about the text: “We should do better, in my view, to adopt a critical vocabulary which allows the text to invite certain readings and offer specific positions to its addressee” (Griffin 167). The dialogism depicted in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* reflects variety of moods and shades like a prism that reflects light in different shades from different angles of vision. Similarly, the text reflects multiple versions of dialogic relations

from various aspects of theoretical framework. This individuality of dialogism can be related to Gabrielle McIntire's article, "Heteroglossia, Monologism, and Fascism: Bernard Reads *the Waves*". In this article McIntire's comments on Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* are that the novel exhibits "heteroglossia extraordinaire" (McIntire 29).

In this specific kind of heteroglossia the characters repeat each other's dialogues in a harmonious way. It makes us understand how the dialogue is basically a shared language. It is made up of small parts of speech that are exchanged between individuals. Therefore, the original speech is actually "shared speech". McIntire argues that each speech is either partially or completely borrowed from some source. If we take dialogue spoken by a person as a discourse made up of different utterances, these utterances may be intentionally borrowed or unintentionally copied from someone else's speech. "Nothing is original and static in the world of dialogue. It is a molten state of speech exchange" (McIntire 29).

McIntire discusses that each dialogue spoken by a person, comprises, "various utterances" that echo back or get shared in others' dialogues. Therefore, a speech cannot be declared original in true sense. Bakhtin's term of heteroglossia identifies this state of dialogue in a multidimensional way.

Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a script written in the form of letters. The story is conveyed to the reader through Eva Khatchadourian's letters. The other characters of the story talk to Eva in her mind and she talks back to them in the form of letters. Now the reader approaches other characters, in first place, through Eva's letters and in second place, through the echoing back in her mind.

The speech of the protagonist is the main narrative, yet it comprises unlimited content from others' dialogues. The reader is continuously subtracting the multiple narratives of others' speeches from the main narrative of Eva's speech. The process unfolds the plot, the events and the core issues. Thus, Lionel Shriver's text is an epitome of the phenomenon of heteroglossia. The heteroglot speech in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is not a static phenomenon. It is the basic narrative pattern that generates variety of dialogues. Mikhail Bakhtin discusses, in his *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, that in novel the dialogue is created between

various consciousnesses. These consciousnesses speak freely without the authoritative control of the writer. This narrative feature produces plurality of consciousnesses and consequently polyphony. The dialogue that emerges from this heteroglot narrative and plurality of consciousnesses offers immense variety and richness for exploration and textual analysis.

The dialogue ranges from internal dialogism of a single word to the dialogue between consciousnesses. In my paper, I have explored Lionel Shriver's text for plurality of consciousnesses and independence of voices. I also quest for the actual status of the writer's voice and its status among other voices in the novel. The scenario allows me to discover the varied range of dialogic relations within the text.

One shade of the variety of the text is in the novel in the form of journalistic text. The narrator Eva copies this journalistic language in her letters to her husband. Eva narrates the mass shooting events taking place at various places, in a series of killing gala in America. She narrates the news clippings from the newspapers about the juvenile American killers. She talks about the killings of fourteen-year-old Barry Loukaitis, thirteen-year old Tronneal Mangum, sixteen-year old, Evan Ramsey, Luke Woodham, Michael Carneal, Mitchell Johnson, Andrew Golden, Andrew Wurst, Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold (Shriver 73).

In 1999, and a mere ten days after a certain Thursday, eighteen-year-old Eric Haris and seventeen-year-old Dylan Klebold planted bombs in their Littleton, Colorado, high school and went on a shooting rampage that killed one teacher and twelve students while wounding twenty three, after which they shot themselves. (Shriver 73)

All of them killed their fellows or teachers or parents at different places and times recently. They have become part of mass shooting history of America. Eva calls this shooting news history, "hindsight" for her discussion about naming their newly born child. It is quite ironical that Eva's surname taken by her male child gives her an edge over her husband, but the same thing becomes lifetime disappointment for her name: "As for his surname our son has done more to keep the name Khatchadourian alive than anyone else in my family" (Shriver 73).

The diversity of speech produces heteroglossia in Eva's narration. According to Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, this detail of previous mass killers in American school reflects series of previous carnivalesque images in newspapers. It seems to be a background mirror image awaiting the onscreen arrival of the fresh mass shooter, to keep up with the tradition of juvenile shooters in society. Eva's voice carries a different tone and impact in relating this deadly detail about her contemporary version of American youth, while she is herself going to give birth to a male child.

This kind of variation in the narrator's tone is a polyphonic feature of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The diversity in tone and the text adds heteroglossia to the novel. It is significant that the format of whole text is curtailed within the script of letters by Eva to her husband. This condition offers limited scope for heteroglossia; however, Shriver has aptly used the available space to produce variety of text through various dialogic conditions. Every dialogic relation requires specific "socio-ideological language." Socially, every character's speech acquires spatial, temporal, and lingual dimensions.

This diversity of speech naturally arises out of the situation. In Lionel Shriver's narrative characters' situation changes with different events that take place in the story. As the plot develops every character speaks different "socio-ideological language" in different situation.

There are different occasions when Eva changes her speech tone, jargon and dialect. She becomes over-sensitively cribbing in her isolation after the tragedy; "I live in a doll's house" (Shriver 7). Eva moves from this simply sensitive narrative to philosophical speech in her analysis of America as a country. She speaks in a painful texture in her pregnancy, in which she feels uncomfortable. Her speech texture becomes replete with remorse when she narrates the event of Celia's eye loss.

The texture of speech switches between nostalgia and investigation, when she faces the crime scene at school. Her speech becomes painful when she gets the shock of her life after seeing Celia and Franklin's bodies pinned with arrows in archery. Thus, with changing social situation and location, characters' speech texture changes.

This diversity of speech creates multiple “socio-ideological languages.” These languages produce heteroglossia that helps us listen to the voices in their own patterns. Maria Shevtsova discusses this phenomenon of heteroglossia in her article “Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin’s Theory of Culture.” The variety of social situations requires different kind of interaction. Human speech has various genres.

A new situation, time or place of speech demands a new genre of speech. Shevtsova shares various life situations ranging from a “domestic fireplace” to “a courtroom” that add diversity of “socio-ideologic languages” to human speech and make dialogues truly heteroglot. Speech genres may vary in the same situations at different times. Shevtsova writes, “there are many speech genres as there is need for them at any definite social moment in life” (Shevtsova 750).

Along with the individual’s varying situation, the demand of the textual jargon changes. The pattern of Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is in the form of letters. This narrative style is an individual genre of speech. Within those letters, there is micro-dialogue and variety of speech existing simultaneously. Eva gives her travel accounts, talks about shooting incidents reported in newspapers, writes children rhymes, movies’ names, and brand jargons.

This diversity of speech also creates heteroglossia in the narrative as Shevtsova discusses it in her article that speech genres comprise daily life diversity as letters, memoires, travel diaries, grocery lists, songs, diatribes, lovers’ chit chat, gossip, and newspapers items (Shevtsova 751).

#### **4.4 Let’s Play William Tell**

Keeping in line with Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, the grotesque imagery in the novel serves many purposes towards the fulfilment of a carnivalesque ritual. Celia’s body pinned against the tree trunk with “five arrows” and staring “grotesquely” exposes the horror of reality in the flashing moment of fun (Shriver 453). While commenting on the life struggle of her husband, in the backdrop of finding his dead body, Eva remembers a reality check on the situation when she says, “This was America” (Shriver 454). Eva’s comments on this occasion, amid a bloodshed scene in her backyard, invoke dialogism replete with irony.

Bakhtin's dialogic terms invoke irony as Bernadette Meyler writes in the article "Bakhtin's Irony": "The terms "heteroglossia", "polyphony" and finally "dialogism", all embody types of irony" (Meyler 105). The primitive tradition of slaughter, mock killing or life sacrifices at folk carnivals can be traced in the imagery of Kevin as a crossbow shooter. The bodies pinned down with arrows like "porcupines" remind the dead bodies left in the battlefield by a warrior. Franklin and Celia's blooded bodies provide the grotesque image of death carnival, celebrated by Kevin at his home, in his backyard with his loving playmates. However, Eva's comment about the site of the bloodshed of being "America" brings the primitive tradition in direct contact with the civilised life of America. Eva's comment relates the murder of father and sister with the larger scenario and triggers a broader dialogism. Lionel Shriver in her interview shared similar kind of dialogic relation with "America." Shriver shares something about the US makes her feel uncomfortable about it. She admits, "Americans seem desperate" (Shriver and Shute 62).

The grotesque imagery of carnival does not act static rather it relates the core issue of primitive behaviour of killing as a fun activity with modern day civilized life of America. At this specific moment, the dialogic relation begins from a new dimension. The cold-blooded murderer, Kevin with a cross bow, waits for the death of his victims, in complete isolation of a pre-planned venue of carnage. This moment invokes many stakeholders to come to the flash lights of the carnival of death and engage in a dialogue.

Kevin planned the carnage scene of his family and friends just three days before his eighteenth birthday. The family might be awaiting a new beginning of his life. The possible celebration of a male child's adulthood as a symbol of good life turns into a carnage of many lives. Kevin's act of killing brought to light certain taboos and static social concepts into the broader realm of active dialogism. Eva questions it as something essentially "American". Shriver's thought process induces dissecting questions about "America" as a motherland for juvenile mass shooters. Eva talks to her husband Franklin about America as the biggest and the most mighty empire of the contemporary era. If every empire has a collapse point, they have been lucky to enjoy the "most pleasant social experiment" before America's fall (Shriver 44).

Eva's dialogue with Franklin generates a dialogism between the expectations of Americans and America. The Americans' happy fairy land of "good life" attained material climax but they lost control over mental and emotional boundaries. Lionel Shriver's comments about "American dream of good life", responds to Eva's question about happy life in America. In her interview Shriver states that majority of the Americans are working hard to attain their dream of "good life" that may never be attained in their life time.

Outwardly they are living in a consumerist culture focussing on financial activity and physical fitness yet inwardly they are suffering from dejection. American common man is living on an "existential edge." Despite their reckless pursuit for their dream of "good life" they are living in an abyss of disappointment. Shriver speaks her heart when she says, "I detect a pervasive soul-destroying disappointment" (Shriver and Shute 62).

Eva seems to share this feeling of perpetual disappointment with Shriver. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, there may be a moment of threshold between life and death. It is a moment of transition. At this critical moment of threshold, previous life ends and a new life begins or death replaces life.

The eighteenth birthday of a shooter may initiate a dialogue about the validity of adulthood in civilised life in America. At the beginning of his life as an adult, he challenged the supremacy of civilized life. The components of carnival are birth, death, rebirth and transformation. Kevin's action suggests that the crossing of threshold from minor to adulthood may not assure the crossing of border line between impulsiveness and rationality. Kevin's dramatic performance as a cold-blooded shooter on the day of his eighteenth birthday reveals the "grotesque-imagery" piled up in his consciousness.

After the tragic event, Eva can relate the predictable traces of the grotesque imagery in their daily life at home with Kevin. She can recall many events that hint at Kevin's potential ability to cross over the social and personal boundaries. After the event of killing, Eva's "internal monologue" reveals her observations about Kevin while skimming through the trash of memories that she "needs to talk about".

#### 4.5 *Mumsey...the Mommy's Monster*

Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a dialogic macrocosm of incidents exhibiting vivid polyphonic multiplicity of individual voices and heteroglot texture of the text. The carnivalesque emerges at the climax of the dramatic activity of the text. It is the mass shooting event at school by Kevin Khatchadourian. In the foreground of this dramatic carnivalesque the life story of Eva Khatchadourian reveals through her letters to her late husband Franklin Plaskitt.

Eva's relation with her son Kevin begins with her decision to get pregnant. Her description of pregnancy appears as a prologue to her conversation with her son, Kevin. If the shooting scene is taken as a carnival of death, happening right at the climax of the drama of Eva and Franklin's life, the building blocks of this carnivalesque events emerge in the dialogue between Eva and her son Kevin as a fetus, before his birth. In Eva's mind also, the dialogic relation with her pregnancy is significant.

Eva recalls Kevin's birth and her pregnancy in her retrospective dialogue with her husband. The bloodshed scene triggers in her mind the Kevin's birth scene. Somehow, both the scenes are linked in the reader's mind as a dialogic link that has analytical value in terms of cause and effect. Eva's notion of pregnancy is a kind of deliberate carelessness. She tells her husband Franklin that she forgot to place her "diaphragm" (Shriver 59). From that moment onward pregnancy seems to be heavy burden on her soul.

The abnormality of dialogic relation between Eva and her fetus sounds in her internal voices. She compares her pregnant body with animals. She resists the positive social dialogism about pregnant woman feeding her infant child. This natural phenomenon seems to her as a creepy addition to a normal human body. She thinks, feeling an infant provokes animalism in human beings. Her inner voice is at perpetual conflict with the social dialogism about pregnancy as a blessing for women. She finds herself curtailed in a cage or prison as a pregnant woman. As parenting is a burden that begins with a willing mother ready to carry the burden of her baby, Eva seems to be an unwilling mother.



She declares that it “sounds to my ear like bad news, “I am pregnant” (Shriver 31). Here Lionel Shriver can be quoted who admitted in her monologue that she has been feeling motherhood as “as a prospectly intolerable imposition” (Shriver and Shute 64). There may be apparently parallel thought process between Eva and Shriver. Eva also shares fear of motherhood in the following words:

Franklin, I was absolutely terrified of having a child. Before I got pregnant my vision of child rearing, reading stories about cabooses with smily faces at bedtime, feeding glop into slack mouths all seemed like pictures of someone else. (Shriver 36)

In Shriver’s text, “Maternal ambivalence” is discussed as a prerogative of a female and not as a taboo. It may be a modern phenomenon for Shriver to bring this ambivalent relation between mother and her child on discussion boards in American society. Lionel Shriver admitted in her interview: “Something that terrifies me, in this case is motherhood” (Shriver and Shute 64). Mother’s feelings of terror, for child bearing process, creates a new dialogic dimension from the perspective of juvenile crime rate in America. Therefore, the dialogism in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* brings taboo probabilities of mother-child relationship and its possible consequences on family life in the civilized society of America.

The prison image that looms on Eva’s image of pregnancy follows her as a mother till she visits her son as a visitor during his imprisonment. She consoles herself ironically: “Last time I read, pregnancy wasn’t a prison sentence” (Shriver 75). Her internal dialogue before pregnancy as an imprisoned person transforms when she visits him as in prison. This image of mother-child relation between Eva and Kevin is in opposition to the initial imagery. The dialogue between mother and son is a development of the initial dialogue between them, prior to the birth of Kevin: “He is my son too and a mother should visit her child in prison” (Shriver 44). Prison image looms over Eva’s entire motherhood. She is unable to justify her double-voiced phenomenon as Kevin’s mother. Her discussion with her son’s attorney betrays her inner scruples: “Whenever I made simple exculpatory statements like, “Of course I love my son” I felt that I was lying and that any judge or jury would be able to tell” (Shriver 81).

The diversity of dialogues implies in terms of the location of the individuals in dialogic relation. The dialogue between a yet to born child and his pregnant mother, feeling imprisoned, converts to a dialogue between a free mother and imprisoned child. The transition allows me to intercept multiplicity of voices and consciousnesses that makes this text polyphonic and heteroglot.

*We Need to Talk about Kevin* also contains polyphony in terms of evolution of microdialogue. This facet reveals the evolution of consciousness in a dialogic relation. Eva's dialogism with Kevin goes through ideological changes. It improves on micro level, in terms of "socio-ideological languages" of the text. In the above discussed pre-birth relation between mother and child, the voices are limited to their mutual circle of interaction, it is personal and limited dialogism.

In the later stage of the dialogic relation, the dialogism extends to social boundaries of other dialogic relations around. Initially mother child relation appears to be resistant towards each other in their mutual dialogue. Later it reflects in the larger social scenario of family life where brother dislikes his only sister Celia.

The maturity of the consciousnesses provoked reaction two ways. Eva Khatchadourian learns the consequences of her reaction to Kevin as her son. For Kevin, it becomes an opportunity to materialize his reaction to mother's attitude. One transition phase in this relation is that Eva admits her decaying relationship with her son Kevin: "I have no end of failings as a mother" (Shriver 44).

In this process of maturity of consciousnesses, the dialogic dimensions attain new phase when Kevin realizes that he has been an unwanted child. Eva renounces her role as a mother. Kevin complains her "You never wanted to have me. Did you?" (Shriver 68). Kevin's reply suggests the reason behind Eva's failure as a mother as she never accepts her responsibility for Kevin's brought up. Shriver portrays Eva with ambivalent motherhood as well as an inability to accept her role in her son's criminal aptitude. There are fissures in Eva's character that makes her a not "to talk about" entity from Shriver's fictional world. Shriver does not want to blame Eva for contradictory approach towards her relationship with Kevin: "Eva...she is not a liar except for the sense that we all are liars" (Shriver and Shute 64).

Eva is also unable to know how frustrated motherhood contributed to overall depression in “American Empire”(Shriver 44). She can relate her failure as a mother with her social experience in an empire that would eventually fall:

That Of course it was an empire, though that was nothing to be ashamed of. History is made of empires, and the United States was by far and away the greatest, the richest, and fairest empire that had ever dominated the earth. Inevitably it would fall. Empires always did. (Shriver 44)

Shriver allows Eva to be a pervasively reluctant mother and exposes her contribution in fissuring apart family bonds as well as her role in destroying peace and security of social fabric of the society through Kevin’s personal disappointment.

The “socio-ideologic languages” reveal the variety of texts and in the novel. The internal conflict of Eva as a mother revolves around her personal image of freedom from bonded relations. She prefers her concept of freedom over her labour as a mother. She fails to feel Kevin as a blessing in her life and takes it rather as an unwanted addition. She explains her pregnancy as a downfall of her body and feels it like she lost the control of her life through her transition “from driver to vehicle” (Shriver 46). Here Eva’s voice seems to be coming from far away land. It is detached from reader in one place and detached from the addressee, her late husband, in second place. It could be heard further away from her son.

It seems an odd aspect of Eva’s narration that her dialogic relation with the world around evolves in the form of finely knitted poetic images of things, places and events. She is eloquently engaged with a dynamic dialogue with the world around. She conducts conclusive and transparent dialogue with everything around, for instance her stance about American empire is: “inevitably it would fall”(Shriver 44). However, she is reluctant, coy, nervous and detached in her relationship with her only son. She is able to discover her gender bias as a reason for this. At various instances she truthfully narrates her mistrust for boys and of course Kevin was a boy too: “I wasn’t all sure about boys” (Shriver 74). She tries to justify her dislike for her son: “Even before I had one myself, I was well and truly frightened by boys” (Shriver 74).

Eva's dialogic narrative is interestingly polyphonic due to variety of "socio-ideologic languages." She speaks candidly as a wife, an American citizen, a travelogue writer, and as a poetic soul. Her consciousness changes in different scenarios. For Kevin her voice is changing in the shadowy area of her mind only. She is most of the time speaking about Kevin out of fear or dislike or uncertainty. Shriver comments on this aspect of Eva's motherhood as a successful delineation of a Taboo relation in the society: "Some parents who've had sour experiences are relieved to see motherhood de-sentimentalized" (Shriver and Shute 64).

Distance between mother and child is another dynamic of the dialogic relation between Eva and her child. The dialogic rifts between the blood relations create chaotic vacuum. Eva is able to talk to her son about his killing experience two years after the tragic event. The gap of two years is a consequence of their odd relation as a mother and child: "You killed eleven people. My husband. My daughter. Look me in the eye and tell me why" (Shriver 464). The question carries monotony of detachment and failure to carry the burden of parenting.

Instead of saying "your father" and "your sister," Eva talks about Celia and Franklin as her husband and daughter. The question seems ironic as well as sarcastic at Eva herself. She refuses to share the loss of family lives, with her son. Shriver explains Eva's prejudiced attitude as a natural outcome of ambivalent motherhood: "So naturally Eva remembered all the scenes in which her son said something nasty and never that he drew her valentine" (Shriver and Shute 64).

Kevin is a victim of relationship failure and Eva stands answerable to him for this dialogic gap. From his growth as a fetus to an adult, Eva shows him unacceptance and reaction. Eva and Kevin never talk to each other, looking direct into each other's eyes. The rifts between pregnant mother and her fetus result into odd mother-child relationship. This oddity turns into a new disgusting socio-ideological language between mother and her six-year old child. Mother reacts violently to her intimate duty of changing the diapers of son and son refuses to learn using washroom for his basic need. Kevin at the age of six years uses diapers and Eva feels disgusting about his habit. Eva becomes violent and breaks his arm. Kevin's arm is repaired but his inner agony turns into violent reaction towards life.

The vacuum in family dialogic relations creates a greater vacuum in Kevin's social dialogic relations. He becomes erratic and frenzied. He takes pleasure in teasing others, may be as a reaction of his torture by Eva. Lionel Shriver in her interview admitted the fact: "My characters all have something horribly wrong with them, which is probably of a piece with my perception of myself as deeply flawed"(Shriver and Shute 63). Perpetual feelings of fear and uncertainty result in strange event of loss of Celia's eye. It was taken as a cause for further blaming of Kevin by Eva and not as a warning sign of some looming disaster.

There is lack of mutual acceptance in the family relations. Kevin loses his identity due to inappropriately gross dialogic relation in family triangle. Franklin is over optimistic father and Eva is an A-normal mother for an A-normal child, the dynamics are set to urge Kevin establish his identity in his peer group as a criminal. He feels pride in becoming a teen-age fantasy of his fellow prisoners, by committing the crime and creating media hype around himself. Eva asks about his socially embarrassing position and gets a shocking reply:

Are you kidding, they fucking worship me, Mumsey. There is not a Juve in this joint who hasn't taken out fifty dickheads in his peer group before breakfast in his head. I am the only one with the stones to do it in real life. (Shriver 48)

#### **4.6 Celia's Glass Eye**

Grotesque imagery evolves due to an unpleasant incident in which Celia loses her eye. The accident generates a new dialogue between Eva and her husband Franklin. Celia loses her eye accidentally, apparently. Somehow, Celia gets drain cleaner into her eye in bathroom. Eva suspects Kevin is involved in doing this to Celia. Franklin, as a father, considers it out of probability to think about Kevin's involvement in this event.

Franklin thinks it immoral to doubt Kevin who is supposed to take care of Celia in the absence of parents at home. So far there is nothing weird in the story. Franklin believes it to be an accident while Eva thinks it is Kevin's brutal act of revenge: "Kevin can reach that cabinet. He is not her savior...Franklin, he did it" (Shriver 70). Out of this common event of realistic nature, grotesque evolves gradually. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, grotesque is an unusual growth that lies in a

disproportionate way. In chapter five of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin writes, "exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (Bakhtin, 303). Celia's eye gets this disproportionate value and becomes grotesque, when Kevin once again targets her glass eye and tortures Eva. Michael Gardener explains the phenomenon of grotesque as an "anathema to officialdom." Grotesque objects have dual meanings and quality of challenging the normal version of reality. Michael Gardener in the article "Ecology and Carnival: Traces of a Green Social Theory in the Writings of M.M Bakhtin" (1993) writes, "when infused with grotesque imagery, objects transcend their established boundaries and become infused or linked with other things" (Gardiner 772).

Celia's glass eye becomes a soft target for Kevin who plays with the imagery suggesting his brutal attitude with Celia. He teases Eva by suggestively using lychees as glass balls and rolling the peeled milky colour fruit on the table. The accidentally acquired glass eye becomes an object of displeasure and pain for a mother whose child lost her eye.

It is not possible for Kevin to roll and peel Celia's eye, so he suggests it through peeling lychees: "Yeah well," he said, stripping the fruit bare and rolling the pulpy globe around the table with one forefinger. It was the ghosdy, milky color of cataract" (Shriver 348). This is how grotesque causes displeasure through association with other imagery, according to Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*: "the example of the grotesque, displeasure is caused by the impossible and improbable nature of the image" (Bakhtin 2004: 305).

After Celia's murder by Kevin, her eye becomes a memory of all the torture that she received in her life. Kevin moves one step further and after killing her takes the actual glass eye with him. During Eva's visit to jail to see Kevin, he keeps the ball rolling in his hand till Eva is shocked to recognise it. When finally, at the end, Kevin and Eva can talk to each other normally, he gifts her the same glass eye "coffined" as a souvenir of their relation turning to normal: "...for along with this dark stained homemade coffin, I was to burry a great deal" (Shriver 465). Therefore, in Shriver's novel, according to Mikhail Bakhtin: "The grotesque was the basis of all abuses, uncrowning, teasing and impertinent gestures" (Bakhtin 341).

#### 4.7 Thursday Carnival in Archery

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival can be applied to the fateful event that takes place on April 08, 1999 in Gladstone High School. It was a "Thursday" when Eva heard the headline news of "fatalities feared in Gladstone High shooting" (Shriver 429). The heteroglot narrative moves towards deadly event which is climax of the series of previous events. The event of shooting with crossbow comprises series of images:

So how was Kevin able to raise that crossbow, point it at Laura's breastbone, and then really, actually, in time and space, squeeze the release? I can only assume that he discovered that I never wished to. That there is no barrier... As ever the secret is that there is no secret. He must almost have wanted to giggle, though that is not his style; those Columbine kids did giggle. And once you have found out there is nothing to stop you---that the barrier, so seemingly uncrossable, is always in your head. (Shriver 443)

The dialogism occurs between images. Michael Gardiner in the article "Ecology and Carnival: Traces of A Green Social Theory in the Writings of M.M. Bakhtin," discusses imagery of carnival: "Genuine carnival images are profoundly dualistic and contain within themselves both poles of change and crises: birth with death, youth with old age, and praise with abuse" (Gardiner 771).

Eva narrates the events in detailed images. The imagery creates a dialogism between the act of killing and the world around. It also creates dialogism between Kevin and other characters around him. Lionel Shriver crafts the imagery of the death incident through Eva's narrative. As a mother Eva perceives the details with acute sensitivity. She is a victim of the event from many perspectives.

She loses her husband, her daughter, her son's school mates and above all, her own son, who is transformed from student to murderer. Kevin's birthday becomes a "Thursday" (Shriver 428). Ironically, he becomes an adult now. Eva's narrative produces the images that imply many interpretations. The multi-dimensional dialogism between contradictory elements reveals the carnivalesque as climax of the novel.

The carnival reveals like scenes from one act tragic play. Every image relates dialogically to cosmic elements with spontaneity and ease. Kevin invited nine school students and a teacher to the school gym. He locks the door from inside and attacks all of them with his “long bow” and “poison darts”. Out of the nine students, two die on the spot. Those who are badly injured die slowly.

Kevin stays there with his bleeding victims. He “pinned” his victims one by one as, “he could afford the fun. He must still have had fifty, sixty arrows in reserve”. Kevin enjoys this element of fun, who is described as “concentrated” and “deadpan”. Eva discovers his mental state to be a result of the discovery that “there is no barrier”. Eva comments on the situation that once crossing the barrier can make the shift as easy as a “a mocking little dance. That said, it is the last bit that harrows me most. I have no metaphors to help” (Shriver 443).

The image of killing with Christmas crossbow in a cold-blooded pattern is loaded with death. After Kevin crosses the barrier, it is a fun activity for him, to see the victims die. Once he mocks the death scene as a dance, he starts enjoying the pinned bodies of children around. The scene of dying children creates grotesque imagery:

Laura Woolford and Danna Rocco were killed by the trauma of the arrows themselves. Ziggy, Mouse, Denny, Greer, Geff, Miguel, and the cafeteria worker all bled to death, trickle by drop. (Shriver 444)

Kevin challenges the authorities in school, at home, in society and in nature. He mocks death as a carnival, crossing social boundaries of dogmas, beliefs, laws, and authority. This crossing over of barriers relates carnival with grotesque, through fun, joy or humour. Nehama Aschkenasy in the article, “Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: the Carnavalesque in a Biblical Tale” discusses how boundaries are crossed in carnivalesque: “The carnivalesque spirit encourages the temporary crossing of boundaries, where the town fool is crowned, the higher classes are mocked, and the body becomes the subject of crude humour” (Aschkenasy 440).

Modern day carnival is about lights. It begins with lightening up the crime scene venue: “I felt dizzy for a moment. The lights of the parking lot scattered into meaningless splotches, like the patterns behind your lids when you rub your eyes”



(shriver 445). It is lit up at its climax by flashes of digital cameras or movie lights or smart phone flashes. In this text, the archery at home and killing venue at school are an instance for this lighting up. The archery is lit up with the flood lights as a venue of blood carnival. Eva herself goes to the backyard and lights up the backyard flood lights.

These flood lights are arranged for parties by previous owners of the house. She watches Celia pinned with five arrows against the tree as if playing “William Tell” with her brother. Lionel Shriver also uses my framework keyword “grotesque” about Celia’s pinned body here: “She winked at me grotesquely” (Shriver 453). This is how my project’s framework and text are closely related and help me find traces of grotesque.

#### **4.8 Unmasking the Shooter**

Kevin’s growth period from an infant to adult is a transformation period for his personality. His behaviour deviates from normality at different stages of his development in life. The child who has been showing occasional deviation from normality, suddenly appears as a killer. Kevin commits cold-blooded murder of his father, sister, and school fellows. The carnivalization of the bloodshed scene reveals the true face of Kevin.

Kevin has been able to develop a unique kind of dialogic relation with people around him. His dialogism is revealed through his mother Eva’s inner voice, who always feels alarmed at his deviance. Kevin’s outer dialogic links, with his family, are deceptive. His acts are pregnant with dualism and betray reality. His father remains totally unaware of Kevin’s inner personality because he has never been engaged with Kevin in bitter dialogic relation, as frequently as experienced by Kevin’s mother Eva.

Two aspects of Kevin’s life transform his dialogism with the world. One is his transition from a normal child to a juvenile criminal and the other is his unmasking as an adult criminal. The fact that Kevin has been able to kill his younger sister with bow and arrow, reveals the degree of normality he was betraying in his external dialogic world.

The unmasking of his real self brings forth the true persona before us. This unmasking is quite significant in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism, in the foreword to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* it is stated that:

In carnival...the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated. One of the essential aspects of this relationship is the unmasking and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks. (Bakhtin 2004: X)

Before I discuss the significant relation of this unmasking with carnivalesque, Gregory Phipps' article can be related here. Gregory Phipps in his article discusses Slavoj Zizek's theory with reference to the social and personal growth of the gun shooting persona in American society (Zizek). Phipps' article is based on the theoretical framework provided by Zizek's theory of mask and the unveiling of mask at a certain moment of carnivalesque. It partially relates to one aspect of my paper's theoretical framework through mask theory and its realization right at the moment of carnivalesque.

Phipps aptly points out the theory of mask in Slavoj and its internalisation by the adolescent youth as a potential gun shooter. Slavoj Zizek's theory of mask is based on his persona for Prosopopoeia in *Less than Nothing*. Slavoj Zizek defines mask as a double self of the persona. The original self stays behind and weaves a fictional self that is like a mask on the original self (Phipps 3). For Prosopopoeia Slavoj Zizek builds the persona when Prosopopoeia says: "When I speak it is never directly myself who speaks, I have to have recourse to fiction which is my symbolic identity" (Zizek 515).

Zizek explains mask as a social veil taken by the persona, behind which he hides his actual "self." The artificially created "self" reflects all those internal conflicts and external resistance factors that are pushing back the persona behind the veil. The mask is a socio-cultural role-play to artificially fulfil the persona's hidden desires. It can also be a personality goal that is otherwise hard to be attained by the persona (Phipps 4).

Zizek states that mask is a “bricolage of transgressions” and is adapted by the persona internally and externally. Internally it helps the character in hiding certain real feelings and externally it appears as a desired role-play of artificial nature. Mask may be defined as an artificial yet real face of persona. The dual nature of mask helps the protagonist in surpassing his repressed emotions, traumas, impotence, and sadism. Zizek writes:

From this perspective the mask is not a social identity that the individual presents to others, but rather a persona that he hides until the carnivalesque moments when he shatters the standard rules. (Zizek 516)

The intricate linkage between an artificial mask and its expression in a carnivalesque moment is a significant aspect of my project. Lionel Shriver’s Kevin and DBC Pierre’s Vernon Little can be analysed for their personal growth through this theory of mask by Zizek. So that it can be further linked to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque. In Gregory Phipps’ article the same linkage to Zizek’s theory of mask is developed for the persona of Stephen King’s *Rage* and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin*.

Slavoj Zizek’s theory clearly relates the internalisation of Kevin Khatchadourian and Charlie Decker’s false norms of hypermasculinity and its expression through the popular term of “coolness.” Both the personas develop an indifferent attitude towards their release of excessive emotions at the moment of carnivalesque. As Gregory Phipps stresses on the point that that the treatment of social and emotional growth of the persona in Stephen King and Lionel Shriver’s novels negates the popular meaningless discourse about gun shooting generated through media and popular fiction. Therefore, it brings about a realistic perspective of the phenomenon of their inner transformation.

The significant point here for my project is that the linkage between the real “self” and the artificial “self” by Slavoj Zizek closely relates to Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque. Another significant point is the way Lionel Shriver and DBC Pierre shatter the artificial and meaningless discourse towards the development of a criminal youth. Phipps also appreciates the investigative and psychoanalytically meaningful evolution of Charlie Decker and Kevin Khatchadourian through their masks and real selves.

Its contribution in relation to gun shooting fiction lies in the fact that it differs from the narratives of masses and media houses. Therefore, the personas in these novels provide the specific approach through which they negate the false notions about the gun shooter. These false concepts include the concept about motivational factors like bullying, failure in academics, and generalised vision of seeing all shooters through the same lens. Phipps writes, “The persona of the school shooter that Charlie and Kevin develop works in opposition to the one that has emerged in contemporary media discourse” (Phipps 102).

The moment of truth in Charlie’s unmasking is at two levels. One level is the emergence of his real self at the death carnival, under their mask of his criminal self. The other level is the shattering of his criminal self in jail after his trial. After his unmasking he hands over Celia’s “coffined” glass eye to Eva. This give away moment may be Kevin’s real unmasking, bringing forth the rebirth of inner self and revealing another facet of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

Kevin exhibits unusual dialogism with his parents since his childhood, particularly his mother Eva. The dialogic relation between Eva and Kevin crosses over the boundaries of social norms and shows taboo issues on Kevin’s part. On the other hand, Eva displays perverted motherhood and resistance towards her son’s need for motherly love and attention. Kevin mocks his father Franklin Plaskitt’s trust on him. The mutual dialogism and polyphony show mistrust, reluctance, and deliberate silence that causes gaps in family as an institute.

Kevin avenges his unaccepted status by challenging the supremacy of social and legal authorities. He crosses over the normality and mocks life by killing his father, sister, and classmates. Kevin’s dialogism with the world during and after the killing incident depicts his self-image as a media celebrity. The role of media and consumerist culture in highlighting mass shooting as a death gala complements Kevin’s sense of achievement as a teen-age hero. In Chapter 5, I have analysed DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* through Bakhtin’s theorizing of dialogism.

## CHAPTER 5

### IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF DBC PIERRE'S *VERNON GOD LITTLE*

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. I read Pierre's text by employing Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and Catherine Belsey's idea of textual analysis as my research method. The subtitle of Pierre's novel is *A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Comedy in the Presence of Death*.<sup>1</sup> I have used part of this subtitle as the main title of this chapter as it relates my framework with my text. Bakhtinian terms of intertextuality, polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque help me locate the instances of trivial comedy in the presence of tragic death.

DBC Pierre was born in Australia in 1961, raised in America, and now he is residing in Ireland. *Vernon God Little* was DBC Pierre's first novel published in 2003. It was written in the backdrop of a shooting incident in Texas high school. DBC Pierre is "Australio-Mexican and has lived in the US" (Mosely 274). His multicultural experiences reflect in his first novel and lend his text a lot of popularity and readership. With a history of drug-addiction and then his rehabilitation in Australia, Pierre seems to have captured the effects of "bad psychology" that gripped him as an addict.<sup>2</sup> That is why the way crime psychology has been treated in *Vernon God Little* is quite intriguing because of Pierre's own drug abuse record.

DBC Pierre won Booker Prize for fiction in 2003 and Whitbread First Novel Award in 2003 for this debut text. *Vernon God Little* was followed by *Ludmila's Broken English* published in 2006. Later novels include *Lights Out in Wonderland* published in 2010, *Breakfast with Borgias* published in 2014, and *Release the Bats* published in 2016. DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* is a comic novel, written in the backdrop of a tragic event of the mass shooting in school that takes place in Martirio on Tuesday. Jesus Navarro shot himself after killing his sixteen schoolmates.

Vernon Gregory Little is accused of helping Jesus Navarro in his act of mass killing. Vernon is set on a tedious journey of trying to escape or prove himself not-guilty. The story moves in the form of a sharp comic dialogue in a grim surrounding.

I have applied Bakhtin's theory of dialogism with special focus on his terms: polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque. My textual analysis moves from dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia to carnivalesque. Carnivalesque is an umbrella term that connects polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism like its basic units and expands the canvass of dialogism to broader realms.

I have used Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis" as research method in my paper. I specifically relate my textual analysis to Belsey's approach for the connection between the text and the analyst. The text puts certain limitations on the analyst's view about it. Belsey is of the view that the textual analyst can view the text from dual perspective. One perspective comes from the text and the other can be from the analyst himself/herself. It is up to the analyst to select his angle of vision for analysis. Catherine Belsey writes:

The text exercises certain constraints, and yet we are not entirely at its mercy. A good textual analyst would be aware of the text's requirement on us but would also know that we might deliberately refuse to take position text offers, might choose to look at it from somewhere else. (Griffin 168)

Pierre also offers two perspectives in his text: one is to see the text from the authorial view point and the other is to view it from the narrator Vernon Little's perspective. My lens of Bakhtin's terms of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia allows me a broader spectrum of analysis. I analyse DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* under the following sub-heads:

- Trivial Dialogism in Tragic Backdrop
- Polyphony...Whispering of Dried Voices
- Heteroglossia
- The Carnival of Zoo at Reality TV
- Conclusion

## 5.2 Trivial Dialogism in Tragic Backdrop

DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* is a dialogue of existence narrated through Vernon's life. His best friend Jesus Navarro massacred sixteen students of his class and then took his own life. All this happens in a small town of Texas, Martirio, that is close to the Mexican border. Vernon becomes an ironic victim of the crime that he has not committed. In the outer realm of Vernon's life, there is a catastrophic event of shooting that takes sixteen lives. In the inner side of his mind, a dialogue about his desire to escape the reality of his existence continues.

Jesus Navarro escaped the masses' trial through self-acclaimed death penalty and the next victim of vengeance is Vernon. Merritt Moseley, in the article "The Booker Prize for 2003," comments on Vernon's state after the tragic event and calls him a "loner." Vernon suffers because of the behaviour of people living in the small town of Martirio who are ignorant and make hasty judgements. Vernon's life is also affected, "by the way the powerful, including the officialdom, the media and the rich, manipulate the powerless" (Moseley 283).

Vernon is engaged in a dialogue that defines his existence but only from his own perspective of, "I." Mosley's comment tells us about Vernon's unique position in the story. The mass killings by Jesus Navarro affects the whole society but Vernon suffers as a "loner" because of his unique experience and position. Vernon's perspective in the story can be viewed only through his position as "I" and the dialogue that takes place inside his mind. Michael Holquist discusses dialogue and existence in *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* and states that Bakhtin defines existence as a "unique and unified event of being." His concept of existence gives a unique position to the world around "I." Holquist writes:

Since Bakhtin sees the world as an activity, he defines existence as an event. The activity of the world comes to each of us as a series of events that uniquely occur in the site "I" and only "I" occupy in the world. (Holquist 23)

There is a simultaneous track of events moving inside and around Vernon. These events take the reader through emotional and mental apocalypse of modern living. The pace of events happening around Vernon lies in inverse order on two levels: personal and social. On social level, a mass murder activity is dispersed away in trivial discussions of daily life. The discussion often turns into a funny dialogic

exchange between individuals. On personal level for Vernon, the lighter tone of his false indictment results in serious situation of failure to escape. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, as discussed in chapter II of Michael Holquist's *Dialogism* entitled "Existence as Dialogue," explains the existence of Vernon in this situation producing trivial dialogue in a deadly background. Holquist's version of dialogism shows Vernon with his grim reality moving towards his own tragic doom. This scenario creates a comic background of trivial social activity focussed on the mass murder. As Holquist explains that contrast is a significant factor for dialogism, he writes:

Dialogism like relativity takes it for granted that nothing can be perceived except against the perspective of something else: dialogism's master assumption is that there is no figure without a ground. The mind is so structured that the world is always perceived through this contrast. (Holquist 20)

Vernon becomes the focal point of media hype, T.V channels, and journalistic activity. There emerges a dialogic caricature as the dialogic realm shifts from the tragic killings of innocent lives to the comic conversation of daily life: "the story jumps all over the place, the satire is broad and uncontrolled" (Moseley 283). This dialogic caricature sprinkles away tiny exchange of comic dialogues about trivial things in life. Vernon is both a victim and an observer of this phenomenon.

From Vernon's selection for police investigation as Jessus Navara's helper till the ending of the novel, the dialogism seems to be a distraction from the tragic event. Yet the trivial distractions indirectly bring the tragic event into focus. Apparently, all the focus is on TV ads, media tropes, popular movie culture, and dialogues about this. Vernon is facing a real-life challenge of aiding a mass murderer, but he is trying to escape the situation through cliché ideas of low-rent pop culture. As DBC Pierre stated in his email in reply to my query:

In as much as dialogic works are in continual dialogue with previous works, I designed VGL to hold that dialogue with most commercial and superficial works of his culture which are TV movies and advertisements and their popular tropes. Vernon relies on all the low-rent ideas of cliché pop culture in order to try and navigate his way through real-life hardships (ideas like happy-



ending syndrome). (Pierre, DBC. "Re: Vernon God Little." Received by Nighat Zaitoon, 28 Oct. 2018)

Vernon is continuously involved in a dialogue with the commercial and superficial works of his social life. The cliché jargon of popular TV series, influence of advertisement world on common man's life, and influential role of media persons in one's life seems to create a real-world dialogue in American society, "striking the very heart of George W. Bush's America. Humour. Pathos. Great Dialogue" (Moseley 283). Consequently, Vernon is running across social and geographical boundaries to escape his problem, as a perpetual failure.

The ratio between the serious charges against Vernon and triviality of his dialogism to deal with them is so disproportionate that it can be explained only through Bakhtin's theory of "self." In the act one, of *Vernon God Little's*, Vernon seems to be convinced that his understanding of TV series and movies is going to work in the right way:

I'm calm about that see? Under my grief glows a serenity that comes from knowing the truth always wins in the end. Why do movies end happy? Because they imitate life. I know it. You know it. (Pierre 8)

It becomes clear that Vernon is holding a dialogue with the larger social scenario. There are movies, popular TV shows, media handling by government and the media persons who influence the discourse generated after every event. Vernon can be heard talking about this truth in a dialogue with his inner self and his audience: "everybody knows Jesus is to ultimately blame for Tuesday" (Pierre 4).

The actual mass shooter Jesus Navarro is dead. His death shifts the limelight from personal infliction to social institutions. Now there should have been some repair and investigation measures to curb such events from happening in future. If steps are taken in right direction, the media hype created due to tragic event may lose all its sensation and turn to be a positive reform campaign to address the issue. By doing so, media may lose all the business with those advertisement companies that benefit from thrilling news headlines at channels. Hence, after every shootout, media physically needs a culprit who can be followed up and sold through news items to entertainment industry.

This factor brings distraction from real life tragedies like mass shooting in schools and shifts the focus to news hype, sensation, and humorous caricaturing of false victims to amuse the viewers. Gregory Phipps in his article “Constructing Masks of Hypermasculinity: The Depiction of Rampage School Shootings in Contemporary American Novels” sums up the role of media and fiction in mass shooting events. Phipps relates that how mass shooting is previewed from conventional perspectives of bullying, teen age hero worshipping, peer group pressure, and media’s influence. Gregory Phipps writes:

The shooting is situated within topical issues, including high school hierarchies and bullying, the pressure of masculine ideas, violence in media and entertainment, suburban privilege and other factors. (Phipps 99)

Phipps asserts the role of genuine research about the factors that provoked the shooter. The role of media transforms Vernon’s life and personality as a suspect of mass shooting aide in the American society. Thus “Vernon Gregory” becomes “Vernon god” after going through all the media campaign, and social dealings.

Similarly, at national level tragedy becomes a slapstick comedy due to superficial and commercial dialogism among stakeholders of the event. Phipps points out the critical role of popular plays and novels in highlighting the real issues behind the shooting incidents. In Vernon’s world capitalist media shows the inverse role to this positive assumption and plays havoc with the victims’ lives.

In second chapter of DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little*, Vernon notices his mother’s vision of life that is affected due to advertisement world. He observes his mother’s artificial dialogic relation with her friend Palmyra or Pam. Vernon observes, “she is fatter than Mom. So, Mom feels good around her” (Pierre 12). Amid all the panic of Vernon’s situation who is being taken for investigation as a suspect, his mother engages in trivial dialogue with the social notions of being slimmer or fatter.

Advertisements have toppled the normal senses of human beings. Being slimmer or fatter is major concern for a mother whose son is going to be under trial for murder charges. This is how the trivial things are being replaced with the serious matters. Pyne writes, “media enables the existence of a social order that is rife with inequality” (Parham-Pyne 759).

Similarly, the investigation team pokes fun by focussing on details of matters that could gain public interest. It adds absurdity to tragic situation as Jesus Navarro's physical examination shows nothing serious but the fact that he is wearing odd undergarments. Vernon observes as, "they found him wearing silk panties, now girls' underwear is a major focus of the investigation" (Pierre 16).

This is the socio-cultural dialogism that takes a broader scenario and brings varied fields of life into a continuous discussion platform with each other. How this multiplicity of meaning generated through varied kind of dialogue turns into reality? This question can be viewed in terms of Bakhtin's theory of meaning explained by Holquist in *Dialogism*. Andrew quotes Holquist as follows:

In Bakhtin, there is no one meaning being striven for: the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversified energies is possible. (Andrew 40)

Relating to this quote, the discussion can further be led to the notion that each event generates a dialogue that implies meanings. These meanings are not limited to the temporary or instant space or time they occupy rather they can be taken beyond their instantaneous meanings. I can relate this to Maria Shevtsova's article "Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin's theory of Culture". Maria Shevtsova defines "Bakhtin's chronotope" and writes:

Speech genres are not confined to the relation between the speaker and the listener rather...they are determined by the time and place of utterance ...and rather a precise space—Bakhtin's chronotope—in which they are uttered. (Shevtsova 750)

Therefore, Bakhtin adds time and space to the dialogic relation as significant elements. In the next subheading, I have discussed Bakhtin's concept of polyphony.

### **5.3 Polyphony...Whispering of Dried Voices**

Our dried voices, when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless

As wind in dry grass (T.S. Eliot, Hollow Men)

Mikhail Bakhtin defines polyphony “as plurality of valid voices within a single work.” *Vernon God Little* is polyphonic in many ways. It displays plurality of voices and plurality of consciousnesses. Due to its plurality of voices, it presents a replica from contemporary American society in which there are multiple voice interacting and refracting simultaneously. Vernon’s voice as a narrator covers larger space in the narration, however, as a passive receptor of the environment in specific circumstances it has least effect on the incidents as compared to other voices.

For the reader, Vernon’s narrative may be interesting, pinching or offensive, but his voice is heard in a secluded cellar, talking to himself. As Robinson Andrew writes about polyphony that it welcomes, “multiple voices, perspectives, and narratives” within their own individual spaces in the same text. Andrew states that these polyphonic voices, “exist individually within a text without being sub-ordinated to any single authorial voice or narrative” (Andrew 39).

There seems to be a battle between different voices and their relevant dialogue in the text. The overwhelming voices are interrupting other subdued voices. The dominant voices interrupt the narrative through profanity, comedy, digression, and challenging the normality. By stressing any of these realms, one voice dominates other voices, or suppresses their influence.

There arises a battle front between the dialogic effects of the voices among themselves and with the narrator. This wave of battlefront moves forward or backward. Consequently, tiny worlds of dialogic relations are created. Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*: “Dialogue has penetrated inside every word, provoking it in a battle and the interruption of one voice by another, this is micro dialogue” (Bakhtin 1984:75).

Some voices win over the other voices through their cutting satirical value of irony or comedy. For Bakhtin irony arises through silence in dialogic realms, it is sometimes joined with laughter, to maximise the effects. Bernadette Meyler in the article “Bakhtin’s Irony” writes that laughter is contained within irony. As Bakhtin defines it as a repeated characterization of irony and calls it “reduced laughter” (Meyler 109).

This reduced laughter can be traced in the comic dialogues of DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*. As pointed out by Bernadette Meyler the laughter is closely linked with irony. All the characters speak in their own dialects and own style of irony, satire or comedy. One voice can be clearly differentiated from the other voice through its own individual dialogue as Mikhail Bakhtin calls it "open-ended dialogue" in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and states:

The dialogic nature of consciousness is the dialogic nature of human life itself. Life by its very nature is dialogic; to live means to participate in dialogue. (Bakhtin 1984 :293)

In DBC Pierre's text, each voice can be heard with its own independent individualism, its personality, dialect, thought process, and dialogic features. These dialogic features include tone, style, irony, humour, and satire. These stylistic features make up the character's personality. The polyphonic attributes of *Vernon God Little* display this personality of the speaker in every dialogue of the text. As Bakhtin writes:

In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his life. He invests his entire self in the discourse and this discourse enters the dialogic fabric of human life into the world symposium. (Bakhtin 1984 :293)

An instance of polyphony is that Vernon's voice is displaying a growing consciousness, through his own experiences of life from "Vernon Gregory Little" in chapter one of the book to "Vernon God Little" in the last chapter.

In this evolution of his consciousness, Vernon speaks independent of the author's voice as well as independent of the voice of surrounding characters. A hazy fog of overwhelming voices occupies most of the scenes. Amid this variety of external dialogue Vernon can be heard speaking in his own voice:

I got my fingertip into a whole once, don't ask me which one. It left memories of the mini-mart loading-bay after a storm; tangs of soggy cardboard and cuddled milk. Somehow, i don't think that's what your porn industry is talking about. (Pierre 11)

The polyphonic quality of the text brings various effects to the reader's mind through individual consciousnesses of the characters. Different characters speak from their background ideologies and future agendas. All this merge into the larger polyphonic momentum of the story. Eulalio Ledesma or Lally deceives Vernon on different occasions. He exposes Vernon's reliability on media persons as a reporter to be false. DBC Pierre exposes the falseness of media myth in contemporary American society. In order to this expose this deception the author does not dominate the narrator's voice rather Vernon as a victim suffers through his personal experiences and realises the truth at his own appropriate time. This aspect of dialogism reveals multiplicity of voices and their independent interaction.

Similarly, in family life, Vernon speaks in cutting and ironic tone for his mother. The dialogism between mother and child takes place inside Vernon's mind. This internal voice is truthful, deceived, isolated, and angry. Vernon observes, "for Mom, even though another death in the family will probably fix her true need, like for sympathy. Shame it has to be me though" (Pierre 164). Vernon's inner voice reacts to the relation in a poisonous tone. At this moment, the writer stands apart from Vernon, no authoritative voice overlaps Vernon's voice. Through his transformation from "Vernon Gregory little" to "Vernon God Little," every learning is a new happening in the course of life.

The narrative of the text moves freely towards the ending, precisely according to the dialogic realities of the interacting characters. The transition period of Vernon's life reveals the reality of contemporary society in the backdrop of Jesus Navarro's mass killing at school. Mr. Nuckles, Palmyra (Pam), Doris, Dr. Goosens, Taylor speak in their own unique dialects, inner voices, outer dialogues with their complete personalities. Their mutual dialogism develops the motifs of the story in a discursive polyphonic way.

Palmyra or Pam reveals the artificiality in behaviour and obsession with the branded material things. Taylor and Lally trap Vernon into their mousetraps and push him towards the end of his story as a victim. The court and society assume their own voices in the story. Both the social elements can be heard speaking loud through the inner dialogism of various characters.

Vernon's internal voice reveals courts' working and rules for the citizens. He speaks of "Ole Clarence" in the first chapter of the text and talks about his capital punishment. Vernon observes, "they built him a zoo cage in the court. Then they sentence him to death" (Pierre 3).

Despite all the variety of voices in the polyphonic style, the individual dialogism cannot escape the motif of death. This brings coherence to the diverse voices of the text. The text begins with the slaughter of sixteen school kids by Jesus Navarro. The deadly event keeps a strong impact in the internal dialogic world and external polyphonic voices of *Vernon God Little*. There are several ways in which the motif of death plays around in the dialogic realm of polyphonic text. One is the tragic invasion of death in the form of Jesus' act.

This event triggers the phenomenon of dealing with the death by various factors. As a scapegoat of this event, Vernon Gregory escapes death throughout the text and faces death penalty as a result of failure in proving his alibi. The court gives death penalty to a juvenile criminal like Vernon and has a right to give capital punishment to its citizens. Media houses, newspaper reporters, and viewers together make a larger voice than the victim and the victimiser.

In the triangle of the killer Jesus, the scapegoat Vernon Gregory, and the court, death is the main narrative in individual paradigms. The media houses, channels' reporters, and the audience buy this motif of death with great sensation and zeal. From the context of polyphonic text, in the noise of diverse voices of consumerist culture, death maintains an "artistic polyphony" as defined in the *Problems of Dostoevsky's World* by Bakhtin:

The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and are combined in a unity of higher order than in homophony. The artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event. (Bakhtin 1984:21)

There are tiny pools of unheard voices inside the individuals. This inner dialogism merges with the outer voices and produces meaning. *Vernon Little God* displays polyphony of strange type that comprises mimicking, parody, noise, and blabbering. Life in the world of Vernon Little has come to a point where meaninglessness is the mainstream of life. In the life of individuals, voices are scattered lies or meaningless

monologues. In the social life everything is noise and nuisance. The multiplicity of voices and consciousnesses in the novel helps us understand the reason of social joy that makes reckless noise in the form of pop-culture and reality TV. Beneath the immense noise of joyous outcry, there lies “units of flesh” heaped out for broadcast. Inside the individual there is desire to escape the frenzied mob called society.

#### **5.4 Heteroglossia**

Mikhail Bakhtin discusses heteroglossia in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin discusses novel as a heteroglot genre and heteroglossia as a phenomenon in chapter “Discourse in the Novel”. The core concept of heteroglossia is rooted in Bakhtin’s vision of language as stratification of multiple dialects and consciousnesses that creates speech diversity. Bakhtin talks about “socio-ideological languages”, rooted into different professions, speech genres, and speakers’ generations. Michael Holquist, in his Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, states that “Heteroglossia is a master trope at the heart of all his other projects.” (Bakhtin 1981: xix). Holquist considers “heteroglossia” more basic term than Bakhtin’s polyphony and carnivalesque.

The concept of “socio-ideological languages” (Bakhtin 1981: XIX) helps me explain the significance of heteroglossia in my project for the analysis of DBC *Pierre’s Vernon God Little*. For Bakhtin every epoch has its own “socio-ideological language” different from the language of any other epoch at certain moment of time and space. Everyday life of any historical era or a common daily life exists in its language with its own vocabulary, dialect, slogans, and semantics. This difference reflects the “socio-ideological language” of an era at a specific time and space. It is reflected through “unresolvable dialogues” between the opposite poles.

If a language is seen as a stratified whole, these contradictions between diverse elements exist as heteroglossia. Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*: “these languages of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways forming new socially typifying languages” (Bakhtin 1981: XIX). The languages socially interact and mutually evolve through this intersection. From the writer’s perspective, every language is refracted or expressed indirectly. This indirect refraction shows writers’ intentions for a character to speak certain language.



DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* contains heteroglot language from Mikhail Bakhtin's perspective of Dialogism. I have analysed the heteroglossia in the text keeping in view Bakhtin's approach towards heteroglot text in the novel. Bakhtin explains heteroglossia is a broader phenomenon emerging primarily in the form of stratification of the language resulting in speech diversity. Internal dialogism helps us in understanding the "double-voicedness" of the genres, schools, consciousnesses, and generations in the text.

*Vernon God Little* displays the language pattern of America in the form of an "unresolvable dialogue" between ideologies, schools, generations, dialects and their contradictions. DBC Pierre has been able to refract the uncensored reality of the American society in an exceptionally truthful way. Vernon's language as an innocent victim of mass murder case, betrays truth about his reality. Vernon speaks in a reactionary tone, using slangs and cliché jargon of American society. The dialogic reality of Vernon as an innocent convict to a celebrity court absconder varies in the course of time.

The heteroglossia intensifies with the movement of the story, as the language becomes diverse and dynamic. In the beginning of his story, Vernon seems to be least aware of his situation as a scapegoat in the news loving American society. In his first session in the police station Vernon thinks: "I ain't in trouble, don't get me wrong. I don't have anything to do with Tuesday" (Pierre 3). Vernon's internal dialogism as a narrator of the story is reflecting his actual position in the shooting scenario and the way he expects the situation to develop in his favour further. The refracted intention of the writer seems to be to convey the difference between a victim and a fugitive of the society.

In DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, at this stage, Vernon is just a suspect of helping his friend Jesus in the school shooting scene. His language at this point is not reactionary and least offensive as compared to his language when he is fully trapped in the situation. "Wild fucking Kingdome, I swear" (Pierre 14). As heteroglossia is one's words into another's language, Vernon's language is comprising the social jargon, teenage vocabulary, and media culture. Each word is internally dialogized and displays "double-voicedness".

One voice is that of the speaker and the other one is refracted intentional voice of the writer. The “double-voicedness” of Vernon’s dialogism triggers the phenomenon of heteroglossia through mutually contesting languages of daily newspapers, contemporary media language, film tropes, TV jargons, cultural taboos, and social norms.

Bakhtin’s approach to novel as a living discourse of a society’s languages explains Vernon’s multi-faceted language. Vernon’s language exhibits the verbal ideological history of the society. Within a single dialogue, various languages are contesting against each other. The apparently comic tone creates a distance between the writer’s refracted intention and the speaker’s internally dialogized language. The versatility of comic tone is another facet of heteroglossia in DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little*. Light comedy gradually transforms from abrupt spontaneous comic tone into bleak satirical humour, sharply pointed at the vain norms of individuals and society. Burns comments:

The other...for Bakhtin is a social, not a psychological category, simply put he means utterances, which include both our words and the way we used and the way we used them, are necessarily printed with the traces of previous usage.  
(Burns 5)

Pierre has successfully developed a heteroglot world where ideologies, classes, convictions, and intentions play with each other in a dialogic web of time and space. At every intersecting point of opposites, a contesting dialogic relation exists. Vernon Little is an epitome of the contemporary life’s civilizational flaws and he is also a victim of it. In the school shooting event, he must play the role of a scapegoat and prove his innocence. His concept of playing fair and winning the game, playing hero and reaching the happy ending trashes down to ground. Everything he learns from movies proves false. He learns that life is not a movie.

Ironically, contemporary life is invaded by movie culture and media persons like an army. They hold and control people’s minds and vision. The diversity of concepts in the text oozes out from people’s mental euphoria of media culture. Different characters are rooted deep into different media-oriented mind sets. They speak different languages like advertisement language, theatre jargon, movie vocabulary, and popular print media phrases.

It may be Palmyra, Leona Dunt, Pokorney, Dorris Eleanor Little or Betty, everyone in the novel is representing socio-cultural ideology rooted in the media world of American society. Freedom of mass media seem to have taken away the freedom of masses' minds. Persons are addicted to mass media world and favour the norms of showbiz world like slaves. Vernon little realises this truth about his life and the world around him through harsh experiences of life as a fugitive: "I am just watching plenty of ole TV movies, I guess checking back where I went wrong" (Pierre 205).

There is intense internal dialogism in Vernon's words. He is speaking about the media trial of his life and the refracted intention of the writer is leading us to the media trail of American society. Vernon realises that he is betrayed by the media industry and the deadly consumer culture is treating him like product to be sold at a higher profit. DBC Pierre wrote in his email: "The book's satire lies in that implausible dialogue between TV movies representing hopes, and TV news representing reality". (Pierre, DBC. "Re: Vernon God Little." Received by Nighat Zaitoon, 28 Oct. 2018)

The realisation comes wrapped in witty humour and black comedy through the refracted intentions of the writer, who is doubly removed in distance from the reader but becomes more effective. The interplay of two voices in every dialogue in Vernon's narration intersects the social dialogue by other characters. At the point of intersection, the opposite beliefs and norms are juxtaposed at a certain point of time and space. This dynamic dialogic web between the contradictory elements of society creates heteroglossia in *Vernon God Little*.

The courtroom trail reveals the superficiality and hypocrisy of the mass media. Vernon Little has been betrayed by a Big Channel reporter Lally. The court proceedings move against him because of the insufficient evidence (Pierre 218). Vernon's beliefs about society and his own ability to prove his innocence prove wrong. The unmasking of reality awakes Vernon from false dreams about the justice system of society. If the real shooter of school children might have faced the trial, the media world might have displayed him like a hero. In case of Vernon's trial, he is displayed like the real convict of the crime. The false norms of justice are exposed before Vernon and he is faced with the bitter reality of his life. Vernon recalls the day of mass shooting, as it happened on Tuesday.

Vernon Little had little to do with the shooting scene. He could hardly believe the death of his fellows when he saw their corpses lying in the school yard: “Sixteen units of flesh on the lawn have already given up their souls. Empty flesh buzzes like its full of bees” (Shriver 236). Within this internal dialogism by Vernon, there is dual meaning of the “double-voiced” discourse that enables the reader to read the authorial refracted intentions. The refraction may be slight or intense. It may be from society or from the individuals. The “units of flesh” speak volumes about the way they were treated by the news channels.

The death gala brings the showbiz world rushing to the crime scene. The news reporters are rejoiced to see a heave of “empty bodies” in the school lawn. Ironically the empty bodies are unable to see the soulless bodies scattered around them. The tragic scene is main broadcast for the whole world of TV. The “flesh” is a term that shows lifelessness and suggests writer’s refracted intention of highlighting the media hype of the tragic event. During the trial Nuckles declares that Vernon is the killer:

He killed them all. Nuckles breaks into sobs, barks them like a wolf, and from my cage in the new world I bark sobs back, pelt them through the bars like bones. (Pierre 238)

The animal imagery of court room invites diversity of heteroglossia in the text. The words, “wolf”, “cage”, “bars” show heteroglot language comprising many other languages. In the court room justice is expected but the zoo imagery provoked by these words shows that consumerist culture has converted the whole society into buyers and sellers. Good show may attract larger audience; hence, the court room activity is not based on justice. It is like a zoo in which humans are caged for their own needs and individual reasons. Media comes to broadcast this animal show to the outside world and gain popularity and rating.

The internal dialogism of Vernon becomes reality of the American society, when in a news channel show; Lally proposes that prisoners must be treated like actors. They can be the most popular actors because of their reality TV attraction. Media people plan that money must be earned from the live broadcast of death prisoners. People must choose the next prisoner to be punished through live voting.

The reality TV will go to another level of excellence by earning incredible amount of money due to the audience's interest in live death decisions: "popular TV makes money. Criminals are popular on TV, put them together and presto-problem solved" (Pierre 246). Here the heteroglossia in the text consists of "socio-ideological languages" refracted from many angles.

There is rhetoric in media culture in support of live broadcast of "caged" creatures for entertaining the masses. Voting gives more freedom to already a truly democratic world:

Internet viewers will be able to choose which cells to watch, and change camera angles and all. On regular TV there will be edited highlights of the days' action. Then the general public will vote by fone or internet. They will vote for who should die next. The cuter we act, the more we entertain, the longer we might live. I heard one ole con say it would be just like the life of a real actor. (Pierre 246)

The meaning of democracy grows in depth. Now people can choose the death time of their fellow beings and relish the joy of this activity. "Its humanity in action- the next logical step towards true democracy." Here the "socio-idiological languages" of stratified dialogism in the society intersects and there is so much diversity of thought available for the reader that cannot be interpreted. As Mikhail Bakhtin puts it: "the thematic level of internal dialogism cannot be exhausted" (Bakhtin 1981: XIX).

Lack of humanity in human life has created new kind of dialogism. The panorama of life has been caged inside the TV box. The reality is meaningless, and Reality TV is significant: "The cuter we act, the more we entertain, the longer we might live. The entertainment quality that an individual offer decides his life quality and life span" (Pierre 264). Vanity of life leads Vernon towards a greater riddle of life. He questions, Is there any god or no? Pastor Clarence Lasalle, axe-murderer, in his cell helps Vernon think about reality of god.

He urges a new dialogism between Vernon and his world: "You just ain't faced your God" (Pierre 252). Vernon might face god, but he has no soul inside him for this act. Lasalle preaches Vernon to take hold of his life and reject the ideologies he has learned so far:

Papa god growed us up till we could wear long pants; then he licensed his name to dollar bills, left some car key on the table, and god the fuck outta town... “Don’t be lookin up at sky for help, look down here at us twisted dreamers”. (Pierre 260)

After analysing his helpless plight as a meaningless creature, Vernon decided to play the role of god himself, in his life: “You are the God. Take responsibility. Exercise your power” (Pierre 260).

Vernon plays god to save his own life because there is no outside force to do justice to his innocence. At this point of time and space the text is intensely heteroglot with the intersection of basic dogmas of American society. Religion, politics, media, justice system, and the rights of a citizen are in direct state of dialogism. Each school of thought intersecting the other, providing the logical progress of American society towards a mob culture entertained through carnival of death is broadcasted at reality TV.

## **5.5 The Carnival of Zoo at Reality TV**

The main postulate of my dissertation is to relate the play of carnivalesque to the selected texts and come up with the meaningful findings in answers to my research questions. Moving from major discussion of dialogism to the umbrella term of carnivalesque, I feel like filling the pencil sketch of my paper’s analysis with colours. This is so because there is a core relevance between dialogism and carnivalesque.

This phenomenal link between Dialogism and Carnival, in Bakhtin’s world, is discussed by Michael Gardiner in his article, “Ecology and Carnival: Traces of a Green Social Theory in the Writings of M.M. Bakhtin”. Gardiner explains that carnival is a chronotope of Bakhtin’s dialogic world. It comprises centripetal and centrifugal forces working simultaneously in a specific frame of time and space. He writes, “carnival itself is one such chronotope and came to acquire considerable importance within Bakhtin’s universe from 1930’s onwards” (Gardiner 770).

For Bakhtin, carnival is an amalgam of natural festivity, human rituals, life’s capacity to rejuvenate and rebirth after death. If dialogism is the core relation between self and others, carnival is the traditional instinct to celebrate life in some way. It is a flexible and dynamic term for Bakhtin that relates to his philosophy of life. It is the regrowth after every decay and rebirth after doomsday.

It gives his reader belief to explore new forms of life and its rebirth after tragedy or between two tragic incidents. Carnival is the little rejuvenation of life in some form. Carnavalesque is the complex whole comprising opposite notions. It emerges in the form of grotesque, caricature, and deformity. In *Vernon God Little* Carnavalesque of death in mass shooting event is dispersed in the form of carnival of comic dialogism in the society. The joining of opposite notions of death and comedy produces deformity, caricature, and grotesque. It is from this perspective that Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque relates to my study.

In this project, the primary texts focus on a doomsday event of mass shooting. Precisely at the matrix of time and space, death prevails in all dimensions of time. However, life moves on with a newly emerging dialogue between the victims and the murderers. Rather there is a world of dialogic relations between all the stakeholders of the society, where the event takes place. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is not mere festivity of life, rather it links life to death through some festive rituals or rebirth.

In *Vernon God Little*, the story begins with the deadly mass shooting by Jesus Navarro. The forthcoming events of the plot grow towards normal routine of life. Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque explains the way in which people deal with such incidents at a certain juncture of time and space and explains how they do it. For instance, in case of *Vernon God Little* the daily rhetoric of life is full of cliché terms, comic incidents, satirical language, and graphic distractions. Vernon's narration of events is in a shockingly light-hearted vein. He records the reactions of people to the after-math of tragedy in a vainly comic way.

Patrick Sharkey and Robert J. Sampson discuss the impact of gun shooting specifically on neighbourhood. The article discusses the impact of shooting incidents on mental, emotional, and physical health of the young people living in the vicinity of such a massacre. The shooting event triggers specific changes in the dialogic relations of Vernon with his family, school fellows, and society at large.

The tragic impact of the shooting tragedy is triggers reactions in the society. As Lee writes, "gun homicides can have acute detrimental effects on cognitive functioning and development of youth" (Lee 247). The dialogic relations that develop in the aftermath of tragedy in *Vernon God Little*, ironically result in comic outbursts about trivial things.

This kind of dialogism in *Vernon God Little* makes the reader feel weird about the society and its inverse set of norms. There seems to be linkages between this weird dialogism and Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* discusses his concept of carnival, its history, tradition, significance for human life, and its vital connection with nature, in chapter entitled "Popular Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais." It is Bakhtin's broader perspective of meanings that endowed the concept of carnival a blissful ability to explain certain aspects of modern life's phenomenon of "juvenile school shooting" in my selected texts for the project. Bakhtin writes:

Time itself abuses and praises, beats and decorates, kills and gives birth; this time is simultaneously ironic and gay, it is the playing boy of Heraclitus, who wields supreme power in the universe. (Bakhtin 2004: 435)

Michael Gardiner in his article, "Ecology and Carnival: Traces of a Green Social Theory in the Writings of M.M. Bakhtin," discusses the carnivalesque as a complex whole that comprises contrasting elements within it. The grotesque is an essential component of the carnivalesque. Grotesque is revealed in the excessive, caricature or disgusting dialogism between the basic elements of carnival. The dynamics of carnival sum up the opposing forces as "an indissoluble grotesque whole". The "grotesque whole" is a complex phenomenon that combines opposite poles of life. The grotesque contains the odd imagery that is A-normal. Gardiner writes:

Genuine carnival images are profoundly dualistic and contain within themselves both "both poles of change and crises", birth with death, youth with old age and praise with abuse. All such symbolic strategies are designed to defamiliarize the "commonsensical" and generally accepted. (Gardiner 771)

In DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, "the contradictory images" are embedded in the disproportionate relation of comedy and tragedy. A bleak comedy of murder of sixteen innocent school children and the suicide of the murderer is followed by a diverse nature of dialogism in comic vein. The sudden seriousness of mass shooting event is dispersed away into profane or graphic images, cliché jargons, consumer culture. The suddenness of the comic events is just the opposite of "commonsensical and generally accepted" (Gardiner 771).



An instance of this coining together of comic and tragic in an unaccepted way reflects in the event of Vernon's appearance in court for his trial. The bleak scenario of a teenage boy appearing as a suspect of homicide is juxtaposed with a zestful gathering of media companies, their "cameras and light towers", along with "a lynch mob" on the streets (Pierre 205).

The mob throws available stuff on Vernon's van, on his way to the court. The channels crew captures the scene in utter frenzy of a thrilling moment. Vernon is going to be a death cell prisoner while the media seems to celebrate the event.

Thus, for the street mob and media companies, death and celebrations go together. Consequently, in the overall text several weird dialogism merge to construct a "grotesque whole," the concept that is closely related to the carnivalesque in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin defines the odd nature of the grotesque as its "deformity" or "caricature." In Vernon's situation everything around him creates certain "grotesque" imagery from street mob to media channels. Even the court room proceedings show "deformity" of senses and design grotesque imagery:

Here we go. I enter this court an innocent man, I have to say, and I believe I leave it via the front door, once they hear my story. Truth always wins out in the end, see. I look around at the cast of my whole life, who sit waiting in the smell of finger-paintings and pop corn glued onto cut-outs of shepherd's Joseph Lamb's. Cameras were on swivel mounts, "peoples heads turn with them to watch me being logged into this kind of zoo cage, with a microphone and a big green button mounted on the front. (Pierre 205)

Bakhtin elaborates that grotesque comprises plural meaning due to its dual nature:

The term "grotesque" itself usually conjures up notions of distortion or deformity, mainly for the purposes of caricature or irony. When infused with grotesque imagery, argues Bakhtin, objects transcend their established boundaries and become fused with other things. From this is derived their "pregnant" and two-sided nature. (Gardiner 772)

The dual nature of meaning in the grotesque elements expands its scope of meaning to many directions. However, the meaning remains curtailed within the boundary of grotesque as Catherine Belsey in "Textual Analysis as Research Method" states: "Meaning is plural but not infinitely plural" (Griffin 167).

Vernon experience grotesque dialogue with officially appointed therapist Dr. Goosens. Dr. Goosens, shows sexual digressions during Vernon's psychological examination and therapy. Dr. Goosens treats him inappropriately and makes him feel sexually harassed. In the disgusting situation of physical assault by Goosens, Vernon remembers to make comparisons with "Jean-Claude and James Bond" (Pierre 70). The dialogue becomes coarsely grotesque and contains inappropriateness: "Al-righty, one for Jesus. Just relax, this next procedure won't hurt a bit – in fact don't be embarrassed if you experience arousal" (Pierre 70).

There is exaggerated coarseness in Vernon's dialogic relation with his mother. There is lack of trust, kindness, and hope. They seem to live in individual spheres of life, interacting for the sake of teasing each other. There is no expression of pure emotions from both sides. The superficial exchange of views is in contradiction to the "inner voice" of the narrator. This pivot of relation in *Vernon God Little* between mother and child is as loveless as the one between Kevin and Eva in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*.

The inner voices of the individuals in close blood relations are different from their apparent dialogues. There is either painful silence "pregnant with dualism" or there is freaking hatred, embedded in mistrust. It seems that the relationship already dies in the previous events, now there is meaninglessness that took birth from death of relationships. Vernon's inner voice speaks bitter truth about the relation between parents and children, from his own personal experiences. Vernon thinks, "My ole lady just added the whole affair to my knife, so she could give it a turn every now and then" (Pierre 7).

The language smells of stinking relationship. This may reflect corrosion of morality in society. The imagery used to describe mother-child relation is pinching and inverse of the normal code of society. If the core relations are in the process of decay, then it's the reflection of grotesque in society. Vernon seems to be a victim of betrayal and offers fun to the people around by bearing pain. He is taken in by police for investigation because he has been a friend of the dead juvenile murderer, Jesus Navarro. Here, also friendship is turned into betrayal in some ways.

As Jesus Navarro takes lives of his fellows, he betrays Vernon's friendship and plays with his life unintentionally. Trust and reliability are overcome by the feeling of betrayal. Trusted relationships are the "spiders' humongous webs." As Gardiner points out this is "the distortion and deformity" of real life that produces Bakhtin's grotesque imagery.

How this grotesque that emerged from the death of relations is linked to carnival? Carnival illudes order and links two extremes. After the death of relations, the dialogic relation takes a new dimension. Its freedom from order regenerates after degeneration of humanism. Consequently, abusive language and grotesque imagery is produced. So, carnival is emerging in the form of death of norms and relations. DBC Pierre talks about devastated state of moral affairs, in the American society, in response to my queries through email. He writes:

In the largest sense, I wrote Vernon to suggest that the moral and societal codes, which underlie our current Anglo-dialogue – in art and in life- are gone and have become twisted and corrupt. The book lays the blame for that corruption of dialogue on consumerist capitalism. (Pierre, DBC. "Re: Vernon God Little." Received by Nighat Zaitoon, 28 Oct. 2018)

The carefree attitude towards old thought patterns is a kind of carnival in the book. The bitterness of betrayal gets relief under escape from emotional ties.

Grotesque imagery contains two aspects: one is the physically repellent imagery and the other is abusive language. *Vernon God Little* contains repeated abusive words and intense frequency of slang words in daily life. The quality of life seems to decay in the American society: The apparent concept of American dream of success seems to wither away in grotesque deformation of life. Abusive language is one signifier of this kind of life.

This also explains why abusive language figures prominently in the grotesque imagery, particularly, with regard to, symbolic degradation and the "the bringing down to earth" the lofty sentiments and ideas. (Gardiner 772)

Bakhtin, in chapter five of *Rabelais and His World*, defines the caricature quality of grotesque, which is very closely related to my project, through the exaggerated nature of comedy in *Vernon God Little*, in the backdrop of the bleak tragedy.

Bakhtin writes, “A grotesque world in which only the inappropriate is exaggerated is only quantitatively large, but qualitatively it is extremely poor, colourless and far from gay” (Bakhtin2004: 308). Vernon’s abusive language as a narrator exaggerates many aspects of his existence, in his diversified dialogism with the world around, after he is indicted with the charges of helping Jesus Navarro in mass murder. It indicates his helplessness, his betrayed relations, false ideologies, and meaningless voices around him. “The knife” seems to be suggestive of painful existence, in a cutting dialogic relation with life. This is another aspect of digression from normality. Vernon is dealing the world around in a helpless way, feeling every cut of the “knife’s blade” (Pierre 7).

The blade works as a symbol for Vernon’s position in his dialogic relation with the world. He is a pivot point in a passive dialogism with the events and persons around. It can also be true for him as an adolescent in dialogic relation with the society at large. It begins with the shooting incident, in which he was away from the crime scene because of his exceptional “bowel movement.” He was not aware of his friend Jesus Navarro’s plan of shooting the classmates, yet he was taken by police as a possible suspect of helping in the crime. He was betrayed by Jesus as a friend and then by his institution who handed him over to police as a suspect while he was away from the crime scene. Over all he is betrayed by the society that teaches him bitter lessons in his next phase of life.

The abusive language is a factor that links Vernon to the meaninglessly exaggerated things around him. As Bakhtin discusses that in grotesque the inappropriate exceeds the normal limit. Therefore, from this perspective hyper language creates a nuisance in the text. Vernon as the narrator is responsible for this language bizarre. As a reader, this excessive use of slangs in the narrator’s language helps understand the excessive exposure to the profane in life. From the researcher’s perspective it appropriately fits into my theory of dialogism, with reference to grotesque.

Why the element of grotesque and carnival stand out simultaneously in the dialogic relations of Vernon with the world around him? Perhaps, it is because of Vernon’s oppressed condition. He is a victim of the mass shooting, but he is being chased like a murderer. His inner voices betray his outer voices. He is in constant pain and faces torture of various types. The uncertainty in his trial creates silent fear.

So abusive language and profane scenes create one extreme for his dialogic relation while the element of grotesque creates the other extreme. Between these two extremes the element of fear looms over Vernon's head. How does he manage this? He produces reckless dialogic world with an insane comic vein running through it. Bakhtin explains the linkage of fear and comedy: "In the sphere of imagery, cosmic fear is defeated by laughter... Terror is conquered by laughter" (Bakhtin 2004: 336).

Vernon is a little school fellow who must face a historic tragedy of mass murder as a suspect. His tiny heart oozes out with fear and uncertainty. He is unable to face the anxiety of being convicted for a homicide event. Gradually, his defence mechanism works. He outbursts in laughter due to extreme pain of fear. His verbal profanity is his socio-lingual expression towards unwanted situation. He is betrayed at almost every front of his life. It seems that betrayal is the order of the day for Vernon Little. Vernon's predicament is full of verbal carnival in the form freedom of speech. People around Vernon are captured in frenzy about media sensation. As a scapegoat for the murderer, Vernon provides plenty of stuff for popular TV news channels to celebrate the sensation and thrill through news about him. Death tragedy turns into a media carnival and criminals are treated like entertainment stuff: "A lynch mob crowds the street around the courthouse, throwing things, screaming, and hammering on the van as I drive through" (Shriver 205).

The bitter realities of life trigger events like Jesus Navarro's deadly shooting events. Society plays a broadcast gala based on the tragic event, totally oblivious of the pain of bloodshed. Vernon's growing awareness of society's hypocrisy, intolerance, media frenzy, and materialism disgusts him about this world. The "human condition" is immersed in fun, joy, fashion, and pop culture. It is inwardly wretched and miserable. The carnival of life is surrounded by death and decay. Inside the circle of carnival, people are laughing at the "caged" animals of their species. The whole process of carnival is grotesquely vain. The meaningless pop gala is being televised as Reality TV for entertaining other animals.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

*Vernon God Little* displays heteroglossia through intersection of "socio-ideological languages" of different school, generations, ideologies, and individuals in the text. The moment of intersection reveals the diversity of thought process at war with each

other in American society through the play of carnivalesque. The louder voices are creating noise through their meaningless drum beating to reap profits through consumerist culture. People are worshipping media like god as there is no justice, hence, no god in the society.

Media is manipulating life in a materialistic way to convert it into a pop-culture. The voices of inner pain and cries after tragic deaths like school slaughter are test trials for media. These traumatic voices are over-powered by voices of songs and movies. Polyphonic elements of the text help us listen to the inner repressed voices of internal dialogism and the outer noise of frenzied mobs in their true tone and pitch.

In *Vernon God Little*, the carnival of death is celebrated on reality TV. Innocent victims are chased and trapped to create drama out of their escape from death as in the case of Vernon Gregory Little. Prisoners of death are treated like actors because they would get the higher rating of audience' poll and earn money for the channel. The stinking reality of Reality TV creates grotesque.

Death cells and live broadcast of injecting poison in the prisoner of death cell reveals how inappropriateness has taken hold of the senses of masses in the name of entertainment. Lack of justice makes an innocent suspect a fugitive of law and then a prisoner awaiting death. Lack of humanism leads to the notion of absence of god in Vernon's life. For the mob media replaced god. Realisation of this media myth revealed Vernon of material gods of the society. He must be his own god in a godless society. In the next chapter, I have concluded my dissertation.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have made a concluding discussion of the study. The research project has explored Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and Pierre DBC's *Vernon God Little* through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism. The lens comprises the theory of dialogism and its key terms of polyphony, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque as its components. Dialogism is an umbrella term for my research paper. Polyphony and heteroglossia converge towards carnivalesque chaos, under the broader canopy of dialogism. The dissertation is based on qualitative research method using Bakhtin's theory of dialogism as its lens and Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis" as Research Method. Thus I have tried to investigate Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and Pierre DBC's *Vernon God Little* using the said framework in order to find the answers to my research questions.

The research questions are about discovering the variety of dialogism, features of polyphony, and heteroglossia in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Vernon God Little*. The research questions also focus on the display of carnivalesque in the selected texts. As per thesis statement, the study explores the texts using Bakhtinian lens for diversity of dialogic relationships. It seems to reveal hidden truths about taboo paradigms of American society, their institutional decay, and family disintegration.

The title of my project reveals the pattern of study in a comprehensive fashion. It relates the broader components of the research in a logical way. Since the diversity of dialogism of the heteroglot texts exhibits polyphony, carnivalesque emerges as a climax. Carnivalesque hovers over the atmosphere of the stories of both the novels in the form of carnival of death. Hence the carnivalesque reveals in the climax of both the texts, other events either converge towards it or diverge from it, revealing polyphony and heteroglossia in diverse dialogic relations discussed in the project.

A juvenile killer displays carnivalesque in the event of school shooting in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and Pierre DBC's *Vernon God Little*. With a view to making a comparison of the selected texts, the stories of the novels are inter-connected dialogically. Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* narrates Kevin's tale that begins at his birth and extends towards the carnival of death. Pierre DBC's *Vernon God Little* begins with the carnival of death and moves towards the events after the tragedy.

If we place the novels as inter-connected parts of one story, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* makes part one of the story as it narrates the tale of the mass shooter Kevin, from his birth till his criminal act. DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* begins with the mass shooting by Jesus Navarro and moves towards the events that happen with his fellow Vernon Little, after the tragedy. So, both the novels help us analyse the mass shooting events from two different perspectives in two different scenarios.

One scenario is depicted in Lionel Shriver's text that displays the dialogism involved in the brought up of a mass shooter in American society. Pierre DBC's novel is about the comic dialogism in American society after Jesus escaped his predicament through suicide. Therefore, the texts reveal diverse dialogic relations of Kevin and Vernon within their social surroundings and help us listen to their voices before and after the massacre.

The extensive polyphonic feature of the novels provides an opportunity to listen to the voices of the shooters' close relations, buddies, schoolmates before and after the killing incidents. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque reveals the treatment of death by Lionel Shriver and DBC Pierre in the similar events of tragic killings but in different dialogic situations with the world through the heteroglot text.

I have analysed the text of *Vernon God Little* theorizing Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism. The story seems to comprise two parts: one is the cause and the other is the effect. As the focal point for this consideration is the shooting incidents by a suicidal juvenile fellow and the social victimisation of his innocent friend, the cause and effect relation explain the logical reasoning of the dialogic world that emerged consequently.



If tragedy of mass shooting of sixteen children is the effect of some series of events that takes place before the event and caused the event, the story of Vernon relates many of those events and contains many reasons that can result in a massive tragedy in the society. The interesting thing here is the matrix of time and space, mentioned by Mikhail Bakhtin, that makes us think that Vernon's life is a sequel of Jesus Navarro's life.

The indifferent attitude of society with Vernon, seems to partially explain the cause of Jesus' criminal act. Rather at some point of utter helplessness of the narrator, the reader feels compelled to think that if a suspect has no chances of finding justice, how the main culprit could live up to his just trial. The over active parts of society treat the suspected victim, Vernon, in a deceptive and senseless way.

Hence, in terms of findings of this study, in this discussion, it is revealed that post shootout world contains chaotic dialogic relations in the society as compared to the moment of tragedy in *Vernon God Little*. The chaotic relation between an individual and society triggers the chaotic dialogism in the whole society. Jesus escaped the punishment of his crime through his self-inflicted punishment of suicide. He creates his dialogism with the world by his act of mass murder of fellow students. He further deviates from socially established boundaries of dialogic relations between a legal institute and the criminal through his suicidal escape. The vacuum created by Jesus Navarro's escape brings forth the dialogism between an innocent suspect, Vernon and vital social institutions like media, judicial system and family, in the backdrop of mass shootings. It would be in order to discuss my findings towards the end of the chapter.

This significant dialogism exists on two levels in DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*: one is internal dialogism and the other is external dialogism between individuals and groups. The internal "double-voiced dialogism" relates dual meaning in a refracted way. The speaker, Vernon's voice conveys one meaning and the author Pierre DBC's intention comes through a refracted meaning. The narrator Vernon's internal dialogue reveals his excessive use of slangs, clichés, and repulsive words. In outer dialogism there is noise, pop-music, movie culture, and brand jargons.

Through this research, I find that the trauma in the lives of American youth is reflected through their numbness of senses and inappropriateness. Consequently, young people are speaking to themselves in reactionary language. In social life, media is the mantra of life. Media creates joy through noise in society. There is trauma in the inner dialogism due to ruthless social events like mass shooting in school by Jesus Navarro. In the outer realm of social life, there is joyous outcry over nothing. Inner dialogism is meaningless due to immense pain and helplessness. The outer dialogic relations are noisy and create feelings of pleasure. The intermingling of joy and pain creates isolation and senselessness which leads one to crimes like Jesus Navarro. It may lead one to be a “celebrity fugitive”, absconder or escapee like Vernon Little.

I have also been able to explore through the study that the role of media in defining dialogic boundaries in contemporary American society is revealed in DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* through Reality TV. The same phenomenon is revealed in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* through celebrity mania in youth. The media takes over reality through reality TV shows and creates new social boundaries surpassing human dignity and basic human rights. Media generates its own, “homophony” through the noise of pop-culture, celebrity mania, and brand advertisements. The plurality of social consciousnesses is reduced to media’s homophony through its monoglot narrative of materialism.

The research reveals that the dynamics of socio-intellectual dialogism are overpowered by the noise of media in the American society. The meaningless dialogism causes fissures in basic ideologic and institutional components of the society. Society suffers due to silence and taboo dialogism between intimate relations. Youth is disoriented due to media products. These media distractions lead juvenile youth to crimes. Youth inclines to crimes to ascertain their false celebrity identity. Kevin feels proud of being “a real life” achiever. Vernon must play god himself to amuse his audience, as a death cell prisoner, in the reality TV broadcast from jail.

One of the findings of the study of the play of carnivalesque is that entertainment has become the norm of the day even at the cost of conventional social dialogism. Kevin betrays his mother, father and sister due to his false dialogism with them. Vernon is betrayed by his mother, his friend Navarro, and media persons at various occasions. This betrayal is a consequence of the materialistic dialogism between him and his surrounding people.

My findings are that the value of sacred norms like truth and honesty is reduced to nothing. On the contrary the value of entertainment and entertainment industry has become sacred. The inversion has toppled the institutional dialogism with a person and causes high frequency of criminal acts.

The research project has explored through the play of carnivalesque that Jesus Navarro and Kevin failed to find any ideal in their fathers. Kevin mocks his father's blind trust on him. Jesus Navarro tries to find a mentor in his teacher Nuckles but fails. Similarly, Vernon's mother fails to support him in his struggle to prove his innocence in the trial and Kevin's mother fails to take care of him as a problem child. The dialogic relations in close family bonds betray reality, truth, honesty, and mutual trust. This decaying feature emerges in the form of meaningless polyphonic voices in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and in the form of homophony of media's voice overlapping meaningless polyphonic social voices in *Vernon God Little*.

Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* depicts disproportionate boundaries among family bonds. It provides the texture of text, its utterances in polyphonic narrative and the consequences of inappropriate family dialogism in American society. The intimate dialogic relation between Kevin and his mother crosses over the boundaries of mother-child relationship.

Eva loathes motherhood and resists the positive imagery of pregnancy. She scares six-year old Kevin by fracturing his arm bone. Kevin, on the other hand, challenges the core of Eva's feelings as a mother by somehow causing Celia's eye loss, apparently. He makes Eva uncomfortable through his aggressive physical dialogism and obscene sex activity in her presence. Eva declares that she feels as insecure in Kevin's presence as much as in the presence of some unknown evil male person.

The dialogic relation between Eva and Kevin seems to be devoid of positive feelings and loving rather normal utterances. The polyphony between Eva and Kevin as an infant reveals resistant and pervasive motherhood. Kevin as a child realises his unwanted status. The exchange of dialogues between mother and her teen-age son takes place in an uncertain, tense, and unreliable atmosphere. Eva's sexual harassment by Kevin establishes the presence of some taboo bonding that crosses over the boundaries of natural relations.

Kevin lives in his home with his family in mental and emotional isolation. This suggests the perverted parental bonding. The dialogism of silences on sensitive matters between parents and child, causes hazardous effects on Kevin's personality.

Kevin's dialogism with society is also distorted by media's high-pitched voices. Youth seems to become addicted to media generated manias and addictions. Kevin grabs false notion of hero-worship for mass shooters from media-hype centred on the incidents of killings in schools. Apparently feeling dissatisfied with his intimate bonds at home, Kevin tries to establish his identity as a criminal among peers. It takes two years for Kevin to come out of his self-image of media celebrity and Eva to be able to talk to him about the event.

It is revealed as a throwback on the entire dissertation that the cracks in family life trigger the fission reaction in energetic teen-agers to cause juvenile delinquency consequently leading to heinous crimes in society. The consumerist culture takes taboo issues and crime scene thrill to create sensation among viewers to sell their brand products. The headline news bulletins and reality TV shows deform basic social ideologies, and norms. Entertainment becomes the cost of living and enjoying life. Reality is sold as a product and products are sold through reality TV.

It is revealed through this investigation that this phenomenon of taking over reality by media illudes individuals into false self-images, hero worship, celebrity mania, brand culture, and taboo norms. The process sensitizes the body and numbs the soul. Materialism overpowers the society and death is celebrated as a carnival to amuse numb senses and dumb minds. The authority of established truths and goodness is challenged. Evil becomes enjoyable and truth seems to be mocked. The death gala has just begun, let time decide its future.

## **6.1 Recommendations for Further Research**

Gun shooting has emerged as a feature of accelerating crime rate in youth in contemporary American society. Its reflection in current fiction is both intriguing and tantalizing. Research projects on two recently published novels on gun shooting, Tom McAllister's *How to be Safe* and Rhiannon Navin's *Only Child* would make contemporary approach possible to this trendy crime. Different studies can be conducted to brood over the provoking factors of this crime in the society.

From earlier works on gun shooting, I would recommend *Rage* by Stephen King for investigative literary projects. King wrote the novel with the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. *Rage* was first published in 1997. The novel's hero Charlie Decker's persona is very close to the real-life shooters in American schools. The significant fact about the novel is that Stephen King deliberately stopped its publication and the printed copy of the novel is hardly available. Stephen's text provides a good spring board for many research projects in the field of current issue of gun shooting. The comparative dialogic study of *Rage* with contemporary gun shooting fiction can produce interesting findings.

An interesting study may be conducted on contemporary gun shooting fiction with the objective of diagnosing the socio-cultural factors that are causing depression in a materially powerful society. It may be related to the depression in teen age children who conduct shooting crime or fantasize it as a socially winning game.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I have used paperback edition of Pierre's novel. See DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). Pierre uses the subtitle not on the cover but inside on the page before publication details.

<sup>2</sup> See DBC Pierre on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DBC\\_Pierre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DBC_Pierre). I accessed this website on January 10, 2019.

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