Rani Manicka’s Touching Earth: A True Polyphonic Novel

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Abstract
Rani Manicka’s Touching Earth demonstrates a narrative discursive style which is indeed an appropriate ground for the study of multiple voices and worldviews. Manicka’s representation of the world through an utmost plurality of consciousnesses, each playing its part on an equal dialogical basis to demonstrate the truth, parallels what Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) describes as a “Polyphonic Novel.” The main aim of this study is to discover, in Rani Manicka’s Touching Earth, the polyphonic elements that Bakhtin attributed to Dostoevsky’s novels. This article further seeks to identify the dialogic relationship between the characters, the active participation of the reader, and the author’s position with regard to these. The final goal of this study is to establish the quality of unfinalizability, the capacity to outgrow the determined fixed definitions, and the shared perception of truth in this novel. As there have been limited Bakhtinian studies on Asian texts and, in particular, none on Rani Manicka’s novels, this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature and thus contribute to the body of research on the dialogical dimension of the novel.

Keywords
dialogue, dialogism, polyphony, unfinalizability, Manicka, Bakhtin

Introduction
Rani Manicka (2004) in her second novel, Touching Earth, established herself as a true storyteller, and her narrative discursive style is in fact appropriate to her and her storyline. Even though in the first part of the novel each of the characters, “players,” is introduced in a separate chapter, all are dialogically linked together. The large cast of characters, each coming from a different geographical and cultural background, come together in a house located in London which is called “The Spider Temple.” The setting of the novel spans between an Edenic and innocent background, in which different characters experienced their childhood, to a dark and, eventually, destructive and devouring place in London with strong elements of drug abuse, materialism and prostitution.

In the second part of the novel, the characters speak/think in shorter sections, mostly in the form of a dialogue which reflects the intense interaction between them. In a curious twist, toward the end of the novel, Manicka herself appears in the story as one of the characters, interacting with some of the others, asking for their stories. Manicka’s appearance as “creator” and “creation” adds yet another layer or dimension to her artistic craft. This quality of her novel, with its representation of the world in its utmost plurality of consciousnesses, each playing its part on an equal dialogical basis to demonstrate the truth, parallels what Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) describes as a polyphonic novel. To evaluate the extent to which Rani Manicka’s brilliant novel, Touching Earth, demonstrates the qualities of a polyphonic novel, the present research attempts to examine closely the discourse in the novel.

Bakhtin, in his theoretical principles, highlights the dialogical dimensions of the novel which truly draw the reader into a dialogical interaction with it. For Bakhtin, a novel does not consist of words and statements but is, instead, a combination of discourses and particularly responses to those discourses. Novelistic discourse in Bakhtin’s view relies on meetings and encounters, on coexistence and interaction, between diverse points of views. In what follows, the researchers articulate the enhancement of what Bakhtin posed as the true quality of the novelistic genre that is in a novel, “being there” necessarily demands “being with.”

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main thesis of the present study is to find the polyphonic elements that Bakhtin attributed to Dostoevsky’s novels in Rani Manicka’s *Touching Earth*. This article further seeks to identify the dialogic relationship between the characters and the active participation of the reader. The author’s position with regard to the characters is examined in detail, while the final goal of this study is to establish the quality of unfinalizability in the selected novel. As there have been limited Bakhtinian studies on Asian texts and, in particular, not a single piece of research on Rani Manicka’s novels, this study attempts to fill this gap in the existing literature and thus contribute to the body of research on the dialogical dimension of the novel. This research makes use of the most relevant concept in relation to the study of the dialogical dimensions of the novel, that is, “polyphony.” By close reading of the text and the way the characters are represented, the researchers will reveal the dialogical relationship between the characters, the author, and the active participation of the reader in an unfinalized contribution to the truth.

**Dialogical Versus Monological, A Polyphonic Universe**

Todorov (1984) describes Mikhail Bakhtin (1929/1984) as “the twentieth century’s greatest theoretician of literature” (p. 131). Wayne Booth in his introduction to Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*, declares that “Bakhtin’s ultimate value” lies in his “full acknowledgement of and participation in a Great Dialogue” (p. xxv). Undoubtedly, dialogue is the key concept in Bakhtin’s (1981) approach to literature, and specifically to the novel. His own comment on literary work in *Dialogic imagination*, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel,” provides the best explanation of his endeavor,

> The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. (p. 254)

For Bakhtin (1929/1984), polyphonic novels contain a plurality of “independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” which are not entirely under the influence of the author’s intention. They are instead individual consciousnesses that possess equal rights in expressing their worldviews. In this kind of creative design, the characters are, “not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (p. 7). As a matter of fact, the characters’ voice are equally significant, as the voice of the author himself, while these voices cannot be seen as simply drawn out from the consciousness of the author, and thus governed by its intentions and ideology.

In Bakhtin’s (1929/1984) words, Dostoevsky’s novels are “fully polyphonic novels” because, in them, the hero’s word own a unique individuality together with the author’s word and other characters in the novel. The characters, besides the author of the polyphonic novel, and also the reader, participate as equals in the construction of the truth. In fact, the reader needs also to take part because the dialogic interaction, “provides no support for the viewer who would objectively an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively)—and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant” (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p. 18).

Bakhtin proposes that the underlying fact in maintaining such dialogicality is accomplished through the utilization of specific artistic devices which consequently lead to the “freedom” of speech in literary and everyday discourse. These devices aim to refuse the monologic qualities of the world of objects and, instead, refund the dialogical principles through the introduction of heterogeneous and multiform “materials” into the texture of events. Therefore, elements such as plot and characterization in a polyphonic novel contribute to the creation of a dialogic opposition.

In contrast, monologism from the Bakhtinian perspective designates a situation in which the matrix of ideological values, which represents the practices and novelistic desires that eventually shape the organic reality of language, is dominated by the hegemony and ideology of a single consciousness or worldview. In another register, monologism rejects “the equal rights of consciousness vis-à-vis truth (understood abstractly and systematically)” (1929/1984, p. 285); therefore, it overlooks the individual’s autonomy in producing and perceiving meaning. Bakhtin discusses how European rationalism and Enlightenment thought significantly encouraged monologic principles, which can be seen in all ideological spheres other than literature and philosophy, in society. In his appendix to the *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*, Bakhtin specifically discloses the foremost qualities of the concept of monologism:

> Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change everything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any decisive force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world, represented person. (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, pp. 292-293, italics in original)

In a monologic work, authorial ideology dominates and illuminates all the worlds presented in the novel, thereby leading to a “single-toned” quality that subordinates the monologic work and consequently renders it a lifeless,
“philosophical monologue,” a “dialogue des sourds.” From a methodological perspective,

Monologism is suspect simply because it fails adequately to capture the exigencies of heterodox discursive practices in the social world as well as the inherently dialogic orientation of all signifying practices. Ethically, of course, Monologism objectifies and quantifies human subjectivity and robs individual creativity of any real significance. (Gardiner, 1992, p. 28)

**“Great Dialogue” in Touching Earth**

In Manicka’s *Touching Earth*, the characters are treated as “ideologically authoritative” and independent. The characters, with no particular emphasis on gender and race, are perceived as the authors of a fully weighted “ideological conception” of their own and not as the mute inactive object of Manicka’s finalizing artistic vision. In this way, in the consciousness of the reader, the direct and fully weighted signifying power of the characters’ words destroys the monologic qualities of the novel and, as Bakhtin (1929/1984) affirms, the characters, “call forth an unmediated response—as if they were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of their own individual world” (p. 5).

In the polyphonic novel, the plot plays a secondary role, and this is why the world presented in Manicka’s *Touching Earth* may sometimes seem chaotic when, at different moments, diverse characters come to have their say often without sequence or logical order. It is only in the light of Manicka’s fundamental artistic task, the representation of real life, that the cautious reader will understand the profound organic cohesion, consistency, and wholesomeness of Manicka’s *Touching Earth*.

*Touching Earth* is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness of the author which absorbs all other consciousnesses as “objects” into itself, but is, on the contrary, constructed as a whole which is formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, each having space to utter its words and consequently share its worlds. In this way none of these consciousnesses entirely becomes an object for another; each of them is an autonomous individual free to express its ideology and worldview, to live its miserable life, worshiping at the “Spider Temple.” They communicate and interact with one another mostly in pairs—the Balinese twin, Ricky and the devil (Spider Goddess), and Elizabeth and Bruce. One needs to notice that in a polyphonic novel, the reader participates in an active dialogical exchange and needs to be responsive to the entire event (Morris, 1994). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader’s active participation is demanded by each character. As the storyline develops, when any character is revealing his or her life story, many times, they check the presence and accompaniment of the reader. Constantly, they address the reader directly and ask him or her to judge the situation. The reader needs to be alert and conscious at any given moment to interpret meaning. Nutan, addressing the reader, aims to introduce her grandmother to the reader, “now, how do I describe Nenek to you?” (2004, p. 15). While, later Zeenat also addresses the reader as an actual personage in the novel (2004, p. 27). Many other cases of this direct form of address are seen during the course of the novel. Yet, the most revealing instance of this interaction is when even the reader at the end of the novel ignores Ricky and leaves him:

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Come on. Stay a while. What can it harm? I’ll cook some pasta. Penne Arrabiata, ok with you? It’ll be night soon anyway, and we’ll light some candles. There may be no electricity. I am a magician. In the candlelight I’ll weave my magic, marvellous magic. You will be swept off your feet. I promise you, you’ve not heard it all before. She’s not finished, the Spider Goddess. I’ve still got a few surprises left up my sleeves. This can’t be the end.

Come, you will not sit with inverted glass. We’ll get drunk for the forbidden together. wait a while.

Please?

Don’t go . . .

Hey . . .

Ah well, catch you next time. (2004, pp. 422-423)
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The construction of the *Touching Earth* hinges on the way that it makes dialogic opposition inescapable. The novel begins with each character relating his or her childhood background until all of them gather in London and, as Manicka very artistically expresses it, “the game they played” starts at “Spider Temple.” The plurality of equally authoritative ideological positions, mostly in the second part of the novel, and an extreme diversity of materials, are the primary characteristics of this dialogic relation. This quality enriches the novel with the extraordinary “multi-sidedness” and “multi-leveledness.” In an endless debate, each character is in the process of becoming, and undergoes an active struggle to come to terms with his or her own situation in life; it is worth noting that within this design each individual character is free to decide his or her own fate as all of them are aware of the consequences of their choices.

In the light of this, Manicka’s representation of these “personalities,” each from a different background and all coming together in London and at “Spider Temple” to experience life in a new air, and share and express their own selves, accords directly with the essence of a polyphonic novel in which every voice remains independent yet for its ultimate meaning, depends on the perception and understanding of the others. It is precisely in a polyphonic novel that one can detect the “individual wills.” In *Touching Earth*, we can observe the combination of several “individual
wills”; as Bakhtin (1929/1984) puts in, “the artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event” (p. 21). In this kind of reading, the hero becomes a “person of the idea,” a person who is possessed by an idea. Manicka, in this regard, as the author of the polyphonic novel, does not describe the life of the heroes and heroines but the life of the idea in them, and this is what Bakhtin labels the “ideological novel.”

More specifically, the author of the polyphonic novel looks into the world objectively and, from a social point of view, depicts the subjective individual’s soul. The objective contradictions of the social world serve as the basic context for the representation and growth of any single character. Speaking thus, the objective condition of an epoch plays a primary role in the characterization and confrontations of individuals, and this is what qualifies the novel universe with “multi-leveledness” (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p. 27). The fundamental characteristic of Manicka’s Touching Earth is the “coexistence” and “interaction” of the contradictory forces, which are present at the same time in the context of the society of the novel’s time. The safe and innocent and the natural beauty of the background that the Balinese twin are grown up stands in quite opposite direction with the corruption they experienced in the company of the people they met in London. The harsh reality of addiction and prostitution is mostly for the outcasts and foreigners who do not fit the space in which they are situated. The vivid picture of entrapment in drugs, as experienced by Nutan and Zeenat, an inevitable outcome of this situation, is depicted in the novel:

Get a spoon. Put the heroin in. Add citric acid, vitamin C powder, lemon juice or vinegar. If you use citric acid or vitamin C you have to mix a little water with it . . . Always watch the bubbles. You don’t want them in your arm. Look for a vein. Never inject directly into flesh. It really hurts. Causes a lump. An abscess that burns and stings horribly. You must always find a vein.

It was a disgusting thing to do. But we did it. You might ask why we didn’t start by smoking. Not everybody can smoke. My sister couldn’t. It made her puke. So much so she ended up vomiting blood. [italics in original]. (2004, pp. 286-287)

Moreover, after Maggie’s suicide, what Maggie’s grandmother tells Anis deciphers the true relation between being ignored and delinquent behavior, particularly prostitution, “an unconscious desire to revenge neglect” (2004, p. 361). As the individual lives of the main characters of the novel reveal, the conscious reader will find out that nearly all of them are suffering from some sort of neglect. After the death of Ibu (their mother), Nutan and Zeenat found out that it was their grandmother, Nenek, whom their father had truly loved. And while their father planned their trip to London, they felt so neglected and unloved that they decided to accept his offer. This we can see in the life of Elizabeth and Anis alike, when they felt betrayed and ignored by their own parents.

This quality of simultaneity and the urge to see everything as coexisting, and to understand and show everything side by side, as if they existed and happened in space and not in time, leads the author of the polyphonic novel to dramatize, in space, even “internal contradiction” and “internal stages” in the development of each individual in the novel. Of this characteristic, Bakhtin (1929/1984) declares that at times a character might find himself or herself conversing with his or her own “double, with the devil, with his/her alter ego, with his/her own caricature” (p. 28). This feature explains the occurrence of paired characters in Touching Earth, such as the Balinese twin, Nutan and Zeenat, Ricky with the devil (Spider Goddess), Francesca with her own alter ego, and so forth.

Indeed, out of every contradiction within a single character, Manicka tried to create two persons, to dramatize the contradiction and develop it extensively. The characters in this regard, as “essential” beings, remember from their past only what has not ceased to be present for them, that which is still experienced by them as the present: namely, an unexpected sin, a crime, an unforgivable insult. This is why there is much more emphasis on these facts, rather than a full biography of the characters. The moments experienced and mentioned by the characters influence their later lives, yet every act a character commits is in the present and is for this very reason not and cannot be predetermined—finalized; it is conceived of and represented by the author as free.

Meanwhile the characters are living their present lives, the history of each soul is presented in the novel; but it must be underlined that these descriptions are not in isolation but exist rather together, along with the descriptions of others. As is clear structurally, the narrative in Touching Earth is constructed in the first person for each individual, each “player,” and is in the form of a confession addressed to the other/reader, while there are many flashbacks to their pasts, or in the form of debate, or better to say dialog, with one’s self (dialogical self). This is the interaction between inner voices which are heard many times within an individual, speaking and denoting a negative or positive experience within the self. Generally speaking, there are times when one feels an inner temptation or desire that acts or behaves unusually against his or her interests or morals. This is why, in different situations, a person may feel as if different personalities inside him or her are in a dialogue, thinking and behaving differently from what he or she normally perceive himself or herself to be (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 8).

Rowan (1990) describes this phenomenon as the interplay of subpersonalities, and defines it as a “semi-permanent” and “semi-autonomous” region of the personality, capable of acting as a person. According to Rowan, subpersonalities have a range of relative dissociation in that they sometimes take us gently, while at other times more forcefully. Among many such situations in the novel, this quality can be confirmed by referring to Nutan’s dialogical self when an inner voice is talking to her. She is in desperate need of a shot, after her
sister’s death. Moneyless and in great agony she thinks of a precious dress that her mother had made for her:

But it is very precious. Your mother made it for you.

-Yeah, but I could get another when I go back to Bali. They are easy enough to find.

-It took her many, many months to make it. Don’t you remember she said it is for your wedding?

-I’ll get another.

-It is irreplaceable. Your mother is dead.

-It is only a piece of cloth. I have other things that belonged to her.

[At the bottom of my suitcase I found it.]

-Your mother made it especially for you.

-Piss off and leave me alone. It’s only a piece of cloth. (2004, p. 389)

What Manicka searches for her “personages,” is not an objectified speech which is expressive, graphic, and a finalizing authorial word, rather what she seeks above all are words for the hero. She is very careful about the meaning and outcome of each single utterance and, besides, she aims to be as independent as possible: “words that express not the hero’s character (or his/her typicality) and not his position under given real-life circumstances, but rather his/her ultimate semantic (ideological) position in the world” (Patterson, 1985, p. 39). What is of real importance is the hero’s perspective on the world, for Manicka as a polyphonic novelist seeks words and plot situations that provoke, tease, exhort, and dialogize. And it is this quality that makes Manicka’s work so profoundly original in her creative plan.

Part of Manicka’s creative act is the freedom that she enjoys in her novel, the freedom to be other and to see herself through the lens of her characters and the reader. Bakhtin (1990), in his early work titled “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” points out that the crucial task of the author is “to become other to himself, to look upon himself through the eyes of another” (p. 133). Manicka, as a creative writer, not only takes part in her own novel but also gives this freedom to the characters to judge her and interpret her behavior; almost at the end of the novel, Elizabeth meets Manicka at Anis’s Exhibition:

Then the writer Rani Manicka arrived, and Anis went to greet her. I think she and Anis are together. I saw him brush his thumb along her cheek, and she smiled a slow secret smile.

She was wearing long gloves so I couldn’t see for needle tracks, but I’m quite certain she has picked up Anis’ habit. There were lines besides her mouth and she looked aged, and without sparkle even while she laughed. I knew instantly what was gone, her moment of innocence. Once her face was open and curious, now it is closed and secretive. Her eyes glittered nervously like a cat in the dark. (2004, pp. 427-428)

In Manicka’s novel, the discourse about the character is organized as discourse about someone actually present and alive, a life-like characterization. This dialogicality is precisely contrary to a monological design that expects no answer from the others. In this polyphonic plan, Manicka does not speak about a character, but with him or her. Manicka’s actual presence in the novel as a character adds to this quality, especially when she appears at the end of the novel, living and communicating with the characters. The author’s involvement in the life of the novel and, at the same time, her intentional distance, guarantees a genuine objectivity in the representation of the characters. No authorial presence is, so to speak, seen in the lives of the characters or their ideological perspectives. More importantly, there is no comment, there are no personal attitudes and no personal sympathies on the part of the author; the characters, as autonomous individuals, live their own lives and decide their own futures. Characters do not serve as a “mouthpiece” for the author’s voice (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p. 7). Manicka portrays people and life without saying what she thinks on the questions that are resolved by the novel’s characters in a way appropriate for each.

More traces of an intense dialogism in Touching Earth can be found in the separate elements in the development of the plot when sometimes single chapters contradict one another. This dialogic characteristic, even in the compositional elements, may be proof that the “polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through” (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p. 40). In this kind of explanation, dialogic relationships exist between all elements of novelistic structures, for instance when chapters or episodes of the novel are juxtaposed with one another. The first chapter of Touching Earth, when it discloses the innocent childhood of the Balinese twin, narrated by the limited first-person point of view of Nutan, could not be understood or evaluated separately, or even published singly, without juxtaposing it, for instance with the second chapter narrated from Zeenat’s point of view. Or even without relating it to chapters in London and particularly near the end of the novel when Zeenat is revealing her true self to Rani Manicka, who has appeared as one of the characters and is communicating with them. These are unified wholes relating the stories of the Nutan and Zeenat to other characters in the novel. In the first chapter, Nutan believes Zeenat to be very generous, but later, in the part already mentioned with the interview with Manicka, Zeenat confesses that she was always jealous of her elder sister, mainly because of “that special light she carried inside her” (2004, p. 382):

Nutan thought me generous because I alone shouldered the responsibility of providing the smack . . . she thought I had
sacrificed myself for her, but she didn’t know that it was guilt that prompted me. It was the same reason I had given her the longer garland, the bigger kite, and the best bit of the cake. Racked with guilt at my greed I punished myself by offering her the thing I had wanted. . . . She didn’t understand, knew not of that ruthlessly competitive streak inside me that needed her to sometimes fail. Younger siblings are like the tail of an animal; having grown up in the shadow of its head they appear subservient, but secretly, they are always seeking to undermine the arrogance of the head. Will I ever forgive myself for ministering that first shot? (2004, p. 381)

This juxtaposing of contradictions is what gives more meaning and depth to different layers of this multisided text. So, diverse elements and events in the novel should be considered as a whole, and the truth is ultimately revealed by study of the dialogic relation between these elements. This is why Bakhtin (1929/1984) points out further that “dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text” (p. 40). Later on, he affirms that dialogic relationships are a “universal phenomenon” which provide space for all human speech and all that has meaning and significance. The result of such intense relationships among the internal and external parts and elements in Touching Earth would be dialogic in character, and therefore, structurally, would be perceived as a whole, as what Bakhtin (1929/1984) calls a “great dialogue”:

To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end . . . everything in Dostoevsky’s novels tends toward dialogue, toward a dialogic opposition, as if tending toward its centre. All else is means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. (p. 252)

Unfinalizability of the Represented Truth in Touching Earth

Manicka depicted characters that are primarily occupied with the task of “becoming conscious.” Her characters are the kinds of individuals whose lives are concentrated on the pure function of gaining consciousness for themselves and the world surrounding them. This self-consciousness in representing the hero’s image is by itself enough to collapse the monologic quality of the artistic world. Speaking thus, each individual character is a “pure voice,” when his or her discourse is about his or her own self and about his or her surrounding world. In this regard, based on what each individual character experiences in his or her life in the novel, we can see the active struggle of the self in coping and coming to terms with the state in which they are situated. For instance, Francesca’s first attempt to ignore the fact that Ricky is not the right husband for her on their honeymoon to Bali, and her dialogical challenge to her own self are of significance in this relation:

I felt numb inside. Everything had changed. Perhaps I knew even then that my husband was not mine to keep. . . . that night I awakened suddenly. The sorcerer had come to touch my cheek. His hand was freezing. He was smiling. He had come to take my husband away. . . . I went back in, sat on the edge of the bed, and watched Ricky. He slept like a baby while I was racked with fear. It was as if the island had tried to tell me something, a little warning. He too will disappear like my lone fisherman.

“The fisherman you may take back, but my husband I will keep forever,” I said aloud. Against the crisp white sheets his tanned skin gleamed like polished copper. I knelt on the bed and licked the salt off it, savoring the sleepy warm taste of him, and was suddenly swept away by some nameless need. I bit him so ruthlessly that his golden hair jerked, and swearing brutally his hard body possessed me. He is mine. See, he is mine. Cured inside his strong arms I slept. I forgot the sorcerer waited nearby. (2004, pp. 112-113)

Likewise, the author introduces the life of one character into the field of vision and consciousness of another. This is, in Bakhtinian sense, the confrontation of the truth between individuals, self, and other. Manicka brings her characters into dialogic contact with everything essential that enters the world of her novel. Any time that any character’s “truth” is presented in Touching Earth, it is introduced into the dialogic field of vision of all other major characters, without failure. Anis becomes aware and sees Elizabeth’s and Ricky’s truth as well as that of the twin’s. This happens for all the characters and they interact with each other’s consciousness in a live and active network. Under the influence of acid tabs, “crazy/brilliant,” Ricky was going to give his two little girls some acid tabs as well, but suddenly hears Francesca’s voice, that calls him and shouts to the girls, “go upstairs girls” (2004, p. 257). Even though he is still under the influence and his mind is not working properly, as he himself admits, he is astonished by Francesca’s firm voice. It is in this moment that Francesca adds to Ricky’s astonishment by stating that, “under the olive tree it was you I was crying for” (2004, p. 258). By revealing a truth from the past, Francesca shares a new truth with Ricky, one that Ricky, although not in his right mind, can grasp the moment it is uttered that it is the end for them.

Admittedly, many times within the storyline, Francesca was obsessed with the knowledge that her husband was betraying her without shame, and spoke her thoughts loudly, addressing her own self in dialogical attempt, until finally she could overcome her fears, and acknowledge the fact that Ricky was not hers.

Characters as individual entities come to discover their own personalities, so, as living human beings, they cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand finalizing cognitive process. Neither any other single character,
nor the author is responsible for the speech, action, and outcome of the characters; as long as a person is alive, he or she is not yet finalized. The characters polemically their own fates and definitions of their own selves and this is what Bakhtin calls “inner unfinalizability,” the capacity to outgrow the determined, fixed definitions. From the beginning of the novel, as Nutan and Zeenat are still young and encounter Ricky in Bali, although Nenek knew that he was going to hurt them, she could do nothing to guarantee their happiness. Even later, when the twins’ father offers them a trip to London, Nenek could not prevent the inevitable. She definitely had an influence on the lives of two other characters of the novel but, according to the principles of the polyphonic novel, she could not determine or finalize their life events. These are Nutan and Zeenat, and it is only they themselves who can define and decide their own lives. They consciously leave their paradise for the temptation of an unknown land.

As in the polyphonic novels, Manicka introduces a crisis, a turning point; in another register, she depicts characters’ lives on the threshold and eventually lets them enter the fields of vision and consciousnesses of one another, and confront diverse truths and ideologies with one another. This explains the dialogic interaction of individuals when they are aware and conscious of each other’s truth. The major characters of the novel face a crisis in their lives that influences their later choices, which eventually construct the course of action in the novel. Nutan and Zeenat experience this crisis when they find out that their father really loved Nenek, and not their mother. This happens when their father offered them the 3-month trip to England. By then, they knew that no one actually cared about them, and they interpret the offer as revenge that their father was taking on Nenek. Disappointed and sad at the “drama” that their adults had played on them, they decide to accept the offer, despite Nenek’s disagreement and the fact that they themselves had felt the unhappy consequences of the trip. Nutan discloses her feelings about the “ugly reality” of their trip in a revealing paragraph:

And that day I knew why the oppressive whisper, “it’s all lies . . . it’s all lies . . .” moved restlessly from room to room. He had never loved us. None of them had. Not Ibu, not Nenek and certainly not father. Our existence made theirs possible, polite, acceptable to the outside world. What did my father actually offer? What was this tread if not a bitter brew of thwarted passion simmered down to revenge. And yet I was willing to eat it, for I wanted his gift. (2004, p. 46)

As the self-narration of the Balinese twin indicates, they are tempted to accept the mean offer of their father, so what happens in London is the outcome of this temptation. Ricky experiences a similar crisis when, in his childhood, he visits the ruins of a temple and finds a statue of a goddess. What happens later, when he dreams of encountering this goddess and the conversation that takes place in the dream, is of great importance in his later life. After stealing some money from home and running away, he began work. One night he found all his money has been stolen, he then cried himself to sleep. In his dream he met an enormous spider that sat on the chest of a man, sucking red blood from him. The spider speaks to him in the voice of a woman, “come Ricky build me a temple once more” (2004, p. 86), and Ricky recognizes her as his “broken statue dressed in long flowing robes, the edges embroidered with gold” (2004, p. 87). The spider goddess tempts him to build a temple for her and bring her “poor little souls” (2004, p. 87).

After this dream Ricky gathered all his strength and worked as hard as he could to serve the “Spider Goddess” and her temple, which is actually the apartment in London. In the same way Francesca, by accepting Ricky’s gift, the statue, and ignoring the incidents in Bali, her honeymoon with Ricky, causes her own downfall. Elizabeth’s witnessing of her brother getting drawn in the sea and her anger at her little sister blaming her for his death shade her life in darkness. And later, when she let her sister die in bed as she was suffering from anorexia, she displays her hatred and anger; she took revenge for the miserable life that her sister had brought to the family. Anis’s moment of crisis was also when, as a child, he found his father’s secret file and the truth that his father was a “gay pervert.” Later, he left his parents and lived a life of anger; thereafter, as an artist, he expressed his anger and took his revenge through his paintings. As the story continues, Anis’s artistic gaze falls on Swathi, Zeenat, and Maggie. Maggie’s turning point in life was when a man visiting her prostitute mother came to Maggie’s bed, she then being only 9 years old. Her frustrated mother shot the man in the back and was sent to prison. Maggie grows up to be a prostitute, though also an artist, until finally she shockingly commits suicide.

The polyphonic novel does not finalize characters and does not introduce death into their lives; as was mentioned earlier, the author situates the characters on the threshold. Regarding the deaths of the three female characters in the novel, Swathi, Maggie, and Zeenat, whose existence seems to be finalized by the authorial decisions of their creator, one needs to note that their role in the novel is of secondary significance, as they serve merely as the “pair characters” whose presence in the novel, or better to say their contribution to the novel, is to develop the perception of their paired ones. The three of them are addressees of the artistic gaze of Anis, who communicates with their souls via the language of art and through their earthly bare bodies. Anis painted their souls and, in a way, immortalized them and their existence in his paintings. So a better reading of the novel illuminates the unfinalizability of these personages in their symbolic everlasting life in art, despite their physical deaths. As Elizabeth writes back to Nutan, in the final scene of the novel visiting Anis’s Art Exhibition, “it gallery of broken people:”

But the best of all is a strange painting of Zeenat dancing in a temple. Her nails are long and golden, her clothes are beautiful,
and on her head is a golden headdress. Her face is serene, but her eyes are not downcast, or shy. They are lifted up, and blazing with a strange light. I know it described an unreal fantasy, a dead end, yet it is impossible to refuse the consequences of his [Anis'] longing, the illusion that in some mysterious way, she is alive. To pretend that he still meets her in some secret place where she dances for him. Otherwise how could he paint with such detailed accuracy? Not from memory. (2004, p. 427, italics added)

Zeenat, as Nutan’s paired character, helps Nutan to come to terms with her own self and to define her own consciousness and the surrounding world, especially after Zeenat’s death. Through her suffering in London, that was much more painful after Zeenat’s death, Nutan finally expresses her need for the “other” as her essence is incomplete when alone, “alone . . . ugly. Just one. Who was I?” (2004, p. 393). It is worth noting here that the author has not decided to give Nutan more presence and voice in the novel or privilege her with more conversations, but the fact is indeed that in comparing Nutan with her twin sister, she has the attitude and proves herself to be the “head” rather than the “tail”; so, Nutan’s presence is more sensed throughout the novel. In this kind of representation, the reader comes to know Zeenat, for instance, mostly from the perspective of more conscious and aware characters that are in close proximity to her, namely, Nutan and Anis.

Conclusion

Rani Manicka, in her novel Touching Earth, showed her special ability to gaze deeply into the souls of other individuals. She had the capacity to visualize directly someone else’s psyche. She could depict full and life-like personalities, capable of deciding their own fates. These personalities express their voices from the very beginning of the novel in a great dialogue, while they are neither “self-closed” nor “deaf” to one another. These voices hear each other constantly, call back and forth to each other and, in sheer dialogic form, are reflected in one another. Characters in the novel are depicted as individual entities that come to discover their own personalities in a live dialogical relationship; and as living human beings are not finalized by the authorial decision of the author. Ultimately, nearly all of them, except Ricky, were able to overcome the dark sides of their own selves and decide to free themselves from the “Spider Temple,” the weakest of all dwellings.

Thus said, any character in Manicka’s artistic design is very diverse in the expression that his or her face must assume. Each character speaks to himself or herself; they speak with their own voice, their own ideology, while the reader is the judge of all these conflicting claims. Rani Manicka, as the true author of a polyphonic novel, in this dialogic activity broadens and rearranges her own consciousness; and this is why we cannot render her in the position of a mere objective novelist who acts within the novel as a pure recording camera. Manicka put her own self in the novelistic life of her characters and experiences the same situation. At the end of the novel, the fact that she is an artist, a novelist, matches her personality with that of Anis when both undergo the same life of drug addiction and self-abuse. She lives freely in her novel and lets both the other characters and the reader judge her; she is in no way superior to other individuals.

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Notes

1. To this end, the main emphasis of this article is on Bakhtin’s (1929/1984) discussion in his Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics; mainly the first two chapters: “Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical literature” and “The Hero, and the Position of the Author With Regard to the Hero, in Dostoevsky’s Art.”
2. Shevtsova (1992) in a significant commentary on Bakhtin’s dialogism adds, “The dialogic novel, by virtue of its inconclusive nature, is an open structure. Not only does it give the reader maximum scope for interference through interpretation but, as it traverses cultures, it sounds and resounds anew” (p. 753).
3. For instance, Elizabeth, talking about men, addresses the audience thus, “Men, I will tell you now, are despicable creatures. Ahh, I can see your secret smile. You think your man is better than those I have known. No, no, you poor misguided thing . . . your man is mine” (2004, pp. 148-149)
4. “The idea begins to live,” Bakhtin (1929/1984) discusses further, “only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas. . . . the idea is a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or more consciousnesses” (p. 88).
5. For instance, when Elizabeth let her sister suffering from anorexia die in her bed, and also when Anis felt betrayed and insulted by his father for being gay, and so forth.
6. As Emerson (1983), also correctly notes, novels “grant freedom for the author to develop, which is to say, freedom for the author to play with his own image on the plane of his own work” (p. 279).

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