

Dramatised Heteroglossia: race as heteroglossic in a Singaporean play

By Peter K W Tan & Jin Yi Wong

Bakhtin was fascinated with the genre of the novel in that it incorporated a variety of voices, and hence demonstrated heteroglossia (many-voicedness) (Bakhtin 1981) as a principle of its structure. It is not a stretch to consider a dramatic text as demonstrating heteroglossic tendencies too.

In this paper, we consider Chong's (2011) play *Charged* which tackles the issue of race head-on, and revolves around an inquiry over the deaths of a Singaporean Chinese and a Singaporean Malay recruit soldier, apparently a murder and suicide. The play is then structured as a series of interactions where each recruit who was with the dead soldiers earlier provide mutually incompatible accounts of the events that led up to the tragedy, coloured by their own race-based biases and stereotypes and personal agendas. Because of this it could be said that heteroglossia functions as a technique and a structuring principle to give voice to the various race-based perspectives of the events.

The play is significant from this point of view because it exists against a backdrop of official documents and policies where race is seen as a given in Singapore and questions are not to be asked; race is beyond what is called the 'OB marker' (or out-of-bounds marker, a term borrowed from golf). These documents and policies would constitute 'authoritative discourse' for Bakhtin that are inherently monologic.

We examine how the heteroglossic structuring in the play enables it to examine the tensions and conflict surrounding the question of race in Singapore.

Keywords: *heteroglossia, dialogism, race, stereotypes, Singapore*

1. Stylistics without borders - to cut through divisions

The theme of this conference is a stylistics without borders, that cuts through categories and perspectives. For this reason, I want to discuss a play that foregrounds the category of race. The riots in Singapore between the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Malays in 1964 have led to the principles of multiculturalism and multiracialism which undergird Singapore's policies. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (1990) and amendments to the Penal Code also mean that it is illegal to criticise religious groups, and by extension also racial groups, as the two categories can sometimes be conflated. Instead, racial difference is celebrated, and Racial Harmony Day is marked annually in schools. This, ultimately, is a policy of silence and obedience that has been imposed on the population. As Zubir in the play says,

Things are what they are today because we have been taught that it's impolite to speak our minds; it's insensitive when we are honest; it's hurtful if we don't look away. So every year we celebrate Racial Harmony Day in silence. But inside us there is a riot; there is a spark simmering in our hearts, waiting to explode, spreading like wild fire I cannot bear to contain anymore. (p 58)

The racial categorisation is therefore left unexamined and unquestioned. Race is also seen as one of those categories that go beyond the so-called OB markers. OB marker stands for

out-of-bounds marker, borrowed from golf in the 1990s, to refer to what is permissible in political discourse (Tee, 2005).

2. Heteroglossia - differentiated perspectives

I am suggesting that heteroglossia provides us with a way of cutting through the categories. The Bakhtinian theory of heteroglossia immediately poses a challenge to that clear position. For him, dialogism characterises the human world because authentic human life is an open-ended dialogue. As a result there are multiple voices (hence, heteroglossia), that will influence each other.

Bakhtin also distinguishes between authoritative discourse (AD) and internally persuasive discourse (IPD). The latter is the discourse of individuals that help to position their stories and themselves in the world, and these are voices of individuals without authority, and might jostle with other voices and in fact be influenced by other voices, and as a result therefore, potentially dialogic.

AD, on the other hand, represents the dominant voice, and is seen to be of value because other voices are deemed unimportant. Because the AD is seen as the one that is worthy of attention, AD is seen to represent monologism.

3. Heteroglossia as technique in a play

The deliberate provision of multiple accounts one evening at an army camp is organisational principle of Chong's play *Charged* (2011, first performed in December 2010). In that play, two soldiers, Russell and Hakim, are discovered shot one morning, and much of what goes on in the play represents the enquiries held by the officer Victor with the other three soldiers around that evening individually - Ramesh, Imran and Zubir - and a revised account by Zubir towards the end of the play. We are therefore left with mutually incompatible accounts of the evening of the deaths from the other soldiers there, and one by Victor who issues the public statement. Each of the soldiers' accounts is enacted on stage for the audience.

We could say that this concretises with clear strokes the differences in the multiple voices, leading to a kind of unfinalisability, although admittedly, Zubir's final version appears to converge more with what really happened that evening. (More about unfinalisability later.)

The use of multiple accounts is of course not new here, and a well-known instance is in Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950) with four incompatible accounts of a murder, so that this is now referred to as the Rashomon effect. This also links up to the notion of the unreliable narrator in narrative studies.

4. The category of race in the play *Charged*

Thus far, from the description of the killings and the multiple accounts, we need not be concerned about the category of race at all. However, in the accounts of what happened race becomes salient to the relationship between the soldiers, and race is proffered as a cause for the death of the soldiers. Hence, it is the heteroglossic presentation that is of interest here and how it challenges the authoritative discourse pertaining to race as mentioned above.

5. Racial indexicalisation

How then is race depicted in the play? First of all there is much that seems to support the notion of race as a clear, fixed category, in the essentialistic and non-negotiable manner as given in the government-led authoritative discourse.

a. Situational context

The situational context of these particular soldiers being chosen for guard duty is related to it taking place during the Chinese New Year holiday, and therefore non-Chinese soldiers will be placed on duty.

b. Names and onomastics

Names are of course referring expressions, but are at the same time descriptive as well. There is the Tamil name Ramesh (referring to a Hindu god), indexing the Tamil boy. There are Arabic names - Hakim ('the wise'), Imran ('prosperity', 'happiness') and Zubir (a surname) - for Muslims, and by extension Malays (since most Muslims are Malays). And there are English names - Victor and Russell - which can potentially be used for all ethnicities except perhaps Malays. We know that Russell is Chinese. Victor's surname is given as de Souza (derived from the River Sousa) - a Portuguese surname, and in Singapore this indicates that the person is a Eurasian with Portuguese forbears.

c. Linguistic repertoire

The play is of course in English, designated the 'working language' in Singapore, and is seen as the 'neutral' or 'common' language without ethnic affiliations. The Malay language indexes Malay ethnicity. In the play there is the assumption of a natural affinity to other members of the same race on this basis. The most significant example is the occasion when Zubir is tasked to show Hakim's mother, Madam Zuraidah, her son's bunk and cabinet. She immediately speaks to Zubir in Malay ('Madam Zuraidah and Zubir converse in Malay', p. 33), invoking a common racial identity through language, and using in-group language: 'You can tell me. They won't know, they won't understand us' (p 36). *They* are the non-Malays; *us* are the Malays. She has internalised the idea of racial categories (her internally persuasive discourse). She switches to English when talking to Victor, then she continues in Malay with Zubir.

Madam Zuraidah continue the conversation in Malay. ...

MADAM ZURAIDAH: Did Hakim him hit that Chinese boy?

ZUBIR: I don't know, Madam Zuraidah.

MADAM ZURAIDAH: How can you not know? Weren't you with Hakim on that day? You told this officer that the Chinese boy saw a ghost, did you not?

ZUBIR: I don't know! (*in English*) Permission to fall out, sir! (pp 35-36)

Notice that Russell is referred to as the Chinese boy, again reinforcing racial categories.

Similarly, in Zubir's enacted account, Imran insists on speaking to Zubir in Malay (p 27), only to be berated by Ramesh.

RAMESH: I don't care if you are Chinese, Malay or Others! You are Corporal, I am Sergeant. I'm speaking SAF [Singapore Armed Forces] language! (p 27)

Note how English is described as the SAF language.

d. Indexical references

There are also a number of labels with indexical references to race, sometimes in a derogatory fashion, which suggest that racial categories are the most pertinent:

- HAKIM: Yeah, this camp is halal [permitted for Muslims] now. The rest of the year belong to you Chinese babi [pig] not enough is it? (p 9)
- RAMESH: Got Tamil Tiger representative here! (p 9)
- HAKIM: Haiyah, everyone happy until Channel Eight [Chinese-language TV channel, referring to Russell] came along. Eh go home eat your pineapple tart [item associated with Chinese New Year] la! (p 10)
- IMRAN: I was holding it [the beer] for that bloody ah neh [Indian, derogatory] sergeant! (p 11)

These are especially prominent in the enactment of Imran's account.

e. Presuppositions about races

We also see assumptions about people based on their race. This is Victor at the start of his enquiries with Zubir.

VICTOR: The duty sergeant told me that Russell had a premonition.

ZUBIR: Premonition?

VICTOR: Yes, it means a vision of what's about to happen in the future.

ZUBIR: I know what premonition means ... sir.

VICTOR: Oh.

ZUBIR: It's okay. I'm used to it. I am Malay. People always think that we don't understand 'premonition' and other big words. (p 23)

Victor assumes that Zubir's question was based on his limited English. Zubir picks this up by linking Victor's assumption of the limited to his race. Victor does not contradict Zubir, and so the reason for Victor's assumption is seen to be correct. Individuals are assigned to particular race categories and assumed to behave in ways associated with them.

We have seen therefore how race can be considered a monologic authoritative discourse in Singapore.

6. Enacted accounts

How then does the heteroglossic technique dismantle this monologic discourse pertaining to race? At the very least, it shows how the discordant accounts reveals individual motivations and perspectives that are not linked to race. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) discusses this by referring to focalisers:

In the simplest case, the norms [of the text] are presented through a single dominant perspective. If additional ideologies appear, they become subordinate to the dominant focalizer (narrator), thus transforming the other evaluating subjects into objects of evaluation. (pp 83-84)

Ramesh, Imran and Zubir represent sub-focalisers, and in the case of the play narrators whose accounts give rise to the enactments. These sub-focalisers interrogate each others' accounts, and I would add that theoretically it is possible for sub-focalisers to throw into question main focaliser's account. In Bakhtinian terms, we could say that each sub-focaliser represents an IPD (internally persuasive discourse), influenced by the AD (authoritative

discourse) advocated by the state to a greater or lesser extent. At the very least the enactments show us that the AD co-exists with a range of IPDs.

The heteroglossic sub-focalisers immediately betray different levels of engagement with the category of race from a number of perspectives.

a. Personal preoccupations and agendas

Of course each character's segment reveals the individual character's perspective. It is also clear that there are different levels of preoccupation, and this can be simply illustrated by how there is a different level of indexical references to race. Imran's and Zubir's accounts include a number of indexical references whereas Ramesh's account has none.

This is clear in this enacted account, with Imran as sub-focaliser.

HAKIM: Ya lah, this camp is halal now. The rest of the year belongs to all of you Chinese babi not enough is it?
RAMESH: Eh, what halal? Got Tamil tiger representative here!
HAKIM: You smallest minority, you shut up!
RAMESH: Eh, what right do you have to ask me shut up? We also contribute to this country okay?
HAKIM: What, what you contribute? We Malays are the original race. We gave Singapore history and culture. Chinese, you contribute what?
RUSSELL: Money.
HAKIM: Ah very good. We welcome you. You Indians? You gave what to Singapore?
RAMESH: Mustafa [a department store].
Zubir and Imran go on their knees.
ZUBIR/IMRAN: Thank you thank you thank you thank you, we are grateful! (pp 9-10)

In this segment, Hakim appears to be the one who instigates examining each participant through the lens of racial origin and sums up each person's value from what they have contributed as a member of each race. In other words, race is perceived as a highly salient category.

However, we need to remember that this is an enactment of Imran's account, and this high salience of the category of race should be attributed to Imran rather than to Hakim. This enactment therefore becomes an 'autonomous sign' - in other words, a sign that designates oneself - as described by Authier-Revuz (2003). This salience often leads to mistrust of other races, and we have already noted in the earlier example of Madam Zuraidah's automatically assuming that Zubir will understand because he is of the same race.

Elsewhere we see Ramesh pleading to be able to leave the army without a black mark. Each voice and each enactment is coloured by personal preoccupations and personal agendas.

b. Degrees of self-hatred

We have also noted that Zubir's account also includes a high incidence of racial indexing, but his account interestingly demonstrates not a positive or neutral association with his designated racial category. This comes through in the enactment of Zubir's later account.

He [Zubir] kicks Hakim in the stomach.
HAKIM: Eh, stop! I'm Malay like you, you fucker!
ZUBIR: You shut up! Because of you, I hate being a Malay! You stupid Malay cliché!

HAKIM: What click-ah? Eh speak Malay lah! You don't use all these English big words to insult me, you know? You think I don't know is it, you stupid 'A' level?
 ZUBIR: Then you should study more in school! Stop taking drugs, stop being a hooligan! Stop going to ITE! [Institute of Technical Education]
 HAKIM: I didn't go ITE! They didn't accept me!
 ZUBIR: Fuck! You are pathetic! I'm sick of apologising for your failures!
Zubir hits him.
 HAKIM: Fuck! I don't stay in Bukit Timah like you okay? My father is not a doctor like yours okay?
 IMRAN: Then you blame your own family for not bring you up properly!
 RAMESH: Zubir! Enough!
 ZUBIR: When is it enough? I knock on my employer's door only to have him tell me they don't hire Malays! Is it enough that I have to be included in that national statistic of drugs and crime? We have to keep reassuring the world that we are a gentle race, we are not terrorists. You can stamp my passport and let me through customs! Don't give me a second look!
Zubir kicks Hakim again.
 ZUBIR: Go go to Civil Defence! Go to Changi Point and be a babok [cross-dresser]! Go to prison! Go to jihad! The whole world is convinced that all Malays land up there! Get the fuck out of my face! (pp 52-53)

Hakim doesn't want to be tarred with the same brush as Hakim. Hakim seems to personify the stereotype of Malay youths with limited vocabulary, who are lazy and under-achieve academically. He brings up other stereotypes of Malays being associated with drugs and crime, with Muslim extremism, of cross-dressing (obviously not all at the same time!).

The enactments show the pervasiveness of the authoritative discourse of race, and the emotional damage caused by this discourse. The characters are in the process humanised as they adopt their own positions on the issue.

7. Unfinalisability

Bakhtin argues that the awareness of unfinalisability is inherently tied to the awareness that other people exist as individuals with their own consciousness and agendas. Any unfinalisable concept or character would not need to be read as an individual and not merely a concept (Bakhtin & Emerson 1984: 7). Therefore, characters that are unfinalisable are humanised. Because of the use of the heteroglossically structured enactments under different sub-focalisers, the characters are humanised and unfinalisable.

We might also suggest that the discourse is unfinalisable, and that the monologic discourse is therefore untenable because of the presence of these competing voices. In the context of the Singaporean authoritative discourse of race, the inclusion of these characters as individuals who, though shaped by perceptions of their race, still maintain distinct personalities, desires and motivations. This indicates that racial categorisation is reductive and unhelpful in helping us grasp genuine human complexity.

8. Conclusion

- a. The play illustrates how the discourse of race has been internalised and propagated by the population.
- b. The heteroglossic narrative structure of the play allows the playwright to make his argument against the monologic AD of race in Singapore in multiple ways. The multiple focalisers lead to dialogism and multiple perspectives.

- c. The heteroglossic structure also renders both the characters and events unfinalisable, which also helps to dismantle the AD of race.
- d. I would possible to analyse the play in terms of text worlds too, and that might be a useful enterprise.
- e. It seems possible to conclude that heteroglossia is a useful approach for breaking down barriers!

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