Don Quixote – a Voyage a la Columbus  
(A Perception Based on Russian Sources)

Abhai Maurya  
University of Delhi

Writing on the “Birth of New Novel”, the famous Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky states, “Caravels of Columbus while looking for the shortest route to the country of curry and pepper landed up in a new country which later was named as America...”¹ Continuing his discussion on the subject, Shklovsky further writes,

“As Columbus who had dreamt of finding the shortest route to India, instead of reaching India found himself in a new country, in the same way Cervantes instead of reforming the novel of chivalry, created a new one.”²

We find ample proof of Cervantes’ intention to reform the novels of chivalry by parodying the genre in his “Authors Preface to the Reader” itself. Cervantes, in the words of his “ingenious gentleman” friend, defined the subject of “Don Quixote” as “a satire on knight-errantry” and “destruction of the authority and acceptance of the books of chivalry... among the vulgar.”³

---

¹ Shklovsky Victor, Izbrannoe v dvukh tomakh (Collected Works in Two Volumes), vol. 1, Moscow, 1983, p. 66
² ibid., p. 68
³ Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra, The Author’s Preface to the Reader, in the book: Cervantes Saavedra Miguel De, The Ingenius Gentleman Don
The novels of chivalry are discussed by Don Quixote several times in both the volumes of the novel. Indeed, his madness is ascribed to the excessive reading of the novels of chivalry, which is why the Chapter VI is titled, "Of the pleasant and curious scrutiny which the curate and the barber made of the library of our ingenious gentleman." The results of this inspection being extremely negative, the curate and the barber decided to burn most of the books of chivalry in Don Quixote's library. Towards the end of the second volume of the novel Don Quixote in his monologue makes a categorical pronouncement:

"I now declare myself an enemy to Amadis de Gaul, and his whole generation; all profane stories of knight-errantry, all romances I detest. I have a true sense of the danger of reading them, and of all my past follies, and through Heaven's mercy, and my own experience, I abhor them."^4

Cervantes did, indeed, embark on the mission of demolishing the novel of chivalry. In order to justify the aim that he had set before himself right in the beginning of his novel, he first described quite elaborately how Don Quixote went crazy reading a huge stock of books of chivalry that he had been acquiring even at the cost of selling large chunks of his landed property. Thereafter the author tried to make Don Quixote's insanity look as queer as he possibly could have with a view to project him as the craziest fellow on earth whose head had been stuffed with the most mind-boggling notions of knight-errantry.


Quixote De La Mancha (Ozell's Revision of the translation into English by Peter Motteux), The Modern Library, New York, 1950

266
Even physically Cervantes made Don Quixote look like a scarecrow rather than a mighty figure of a knight as had been the universal practice hitherto. Add to this his entire attire that fitted a joker more than a knight:

"The first thing he did was to scour a suit of armour that had belonged to his great-grandfather, and had lain time out of mind carelessly rusting in a corner: but when he had cleaned and repaired it as well as he could, he perceived there was a material piece wanting; for instead of a complete helmet, there was only a single head piece: However, his industry supplied that defect, for with some pasteboard he made a kind of half-beaver, or vizor, which being fitted to the head-piece, made it look like an entire helmet. Then, to know whether it were cutlass-proof, he drew his sword, and tried its edge upon the pasteboard vizor; but with the very first stroke he unluckily undid in a moment what he had been a whole week a doing. He did not like its being broke with so much ease, and therefore to secure it from the like accident, he made it a new, and fenced it with thin plates of iron, which he fixed on the inside of it so artificially, that at last he had reason to be satisfied with the solidity of the work; and so, without any farther experiment, he resolved it should pass to all intents and purposes for a full and sufficient helmet." \(^5\)

Equally funny is the description of the horse Don Quixote took for launching himself on the mission of knight-errantry. The bones of the horse "stuck out like the corners of a Spanish real". No less hilarious is the manner in which he chose the name

\(^5\) ibid, vol. I, pp. 4-5
Rozinante for his horse which in Cervantes' words was "a horse before or above all the vulgar breed of horse in the world." Thereafter the knight chose the name for himself in a manner of theatre of absurd. Then the hero is shown to have acquired another compulsory accessory of knight-errantry, i.e., a lady, Dulcinea del Toboso, on whom he could have "bestowed the empire of his heart" *a la* all the knights of foregone times. Subsequently, in the description of the first sally, Don Quixote is shown to be acquiring the title of knight-errant for himself in the most laughable manner.

The description of the first sally is followed by the portrayal of the funny manner in which he chose his squire. The choice fell on his neighbour, Sancho Panza, a country labourer, who was poor both "in purse and in brains". Of course, Don Quixote had persuaded him to accompany him as a squire by giving all kinds of promises, including the governorship of an island, which he was most certain to conquer during his forthcoming adventures. Thus having equipped Don Quixote with all the parodied paraphernalia of a knight, caricaturing and turning him into a clown, specially so designed with a view to dismantle the aura of knights and books about them, *i.e.*, the novels of chivalry, Cervantes launched himself on a gigantic operation and heaped all kinds of buffoonery upon Don Quixote during his adventures. However, from chapter XI onwards the style of Don Quixote's speech underwent a qualitative change: he began to speak coherently and simply. He even reviewed the aims of his errantry. It is true he continued to dream, but his vision was no longer blurred, his perceptions were no longer warped. Victor Shklovsky writes that Cervantes during the course of writing the novel soon discarded the plan to parody the novel of chivalry:

---

6 ibid.

268
"He reviewed the concept of chivalry as also Don Quixote himself and ended up in making him an intelligent, modest, chaste and a brave person. The plan of the parodied chapters was soon discarded; subsequently in place of the confrontation of literatures of different genres we find an analysis of reality as projected by these encounters."7

Thus, having embarked on the explicit mission of demolishing the novels of chivalry, Cervantes ended up radically reforming the novel of chivalry and, indeed, creating the last novel of the genre in the new epoch, i.e., in the beginning of the epoch of Renaissance. The Russian author of a well known monograph on the novels of chivalry, M. L. Andreev, has very aptly concluded in this context:

"Cervantes at the end of the day does not execute his mission of destroying the novel of chivalry. On the contrary, he introduces correctives into it by ridding it of extremities. And even though the correction did not succeed in the historical perspective, "Don Quixote", nevertheless, paradoxically, has immortalised the novel of chivalry and it itself in a definite sense has become the novel of chivalry in its highest, extreme, absolute and final form."8

It may also be mentioned here that all great writers almost inevitably end up creating great literary works embodying such ethical and aesthetic values which they had intended to pulverize since these values were quiet contrary to their own value systems. We could cite the example of Leo Tolstoy who had set out to

7 Shklovsky VictorIzbrannoe..., p.82
8 Andreev M. L., "Rytsarsky roman v epokhu vozrozhdeniya" (Chivalrous Novel in the Epoch of Renaissance), p. 5
demolish a woman of loose character, i.e., Anna Karenina in his novel of the same name. However, at the end of the day, instead of debunking Anna Tolstoy ended up tearing the Russian high society of those times to shreds, which, as it turned out to be in the novel, was responsible for Anna’s tragedy. Thus a great writer, if he or she is worthy of this stature, cannot contrive or manipulate the truth which has to find reflection in his or her works even if it is a bitter pill for them to swallow. That is why Andreev is absolutely right when he states that "Don Quixote" is a novel of chivalry in "the highest, extreme, absolute and final form", which is what we shall dwell on in the following paragraphs.

Let us start with the so-called insanity of Don Quixote. It is understood that Don Quixote went mad due to the overdose of reading the novels of chivalry which is why Cervantes embarked upon the mission of demolishing the novels of this genre. However, the madness ascribed to Don Quixote is not madness \textit{per se}. In our opinion, this is romanticism of the highest order. Moreover, on closer scrutiny we find that he was simply being different from the teeming millions of so-called normal, mechanical, “automatised”, to use Victor Shklovsky’s words, and other run of the mill people in the world. He was an odd man out. He did not want to live a routinised life and do one and the same thing day after day and get closer to his grave with every passing day. He was a dreamer and his reckless pursuits to realise his dreams made him look a weird person to those with mechanical perceptions. It is true that Don Quixote is quiet eccentric, queer and weird in many of his pursuits. Perceiving the wind mills or herd of sheep as giants and then going full blast into attack with a bloodied nose at end of the day, and many such like actions, do create the impression that Don Quixote was a mad man. Yes, Don Quixote did indulge in a series of reckless and rash adventures where he had little chance of
succeeding. He had to come a cropper in those blind pursuits. But then, being a romantic, he could not have been expected to calculate, plan, scheme and rationalise or to weigh the pros and cons of all his actions before he embarked on them. That job was left to the normal creatures like his squire Sancho Panza, the curate, the barber and other such minions.

When it came to philosophising about life in general, Don Quixote displayed flashes of a titanic intellect and amazing democratic sensibilities. For example while eating with the goat-herds he proposed to his squire Sancho Panza:

"... it is my pleasure that thou sit thee down by me in the company of those good people; and that there be no difference now observed between thee and me, thy natural lord and master, that thou eat in the same dish, and drink in the same cup; for it may be said of knight-errantry as of love, that it makes all things equal."⁹

While dilating on the meaning of the golden age in the presence of the goat-herds Don Quixote has to say the following words of stunning wisdom:

"'O happy age,' cried he, 'which our first parents called the age of gold! Not because gold, so much adored in this iron age, was then easily purchased, but because those two fatal words mine and thine, were distinctions unknown to the people of those fortunate times; for all things were in common in that holy age: men, for their sustenance, needed only to lift their hands and take it from the sturdy oak, whose spreading arms liberally invited them to gather the wholesome savoury

---

⁹ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, vol. I, p. 64
fruit; while the clear springs, and silver rivulets, with luxuriant plenty, offered them their pure refreshing water."  

Don Quixote pursued the noblest aims in his practice of knight-errantry which is evident from these pronouncements: "... by the strength of my arm I relieve the weak and the distressed."  

Elsewhere he is even more precise: "I am a knight of La Mancha, my name Don Quixote; my employment is to visit all parts of the world in quest of adventures, to right and relieve injured innocence, and punish oppression."  

In his extensive discourse with the barber he has following words to tell his interlocutor:

"All I aim at is only to make the world sensible how much they are to blame, in not labouring to revive those most happy times, in which the order of knight-errantry was in its full glory. But, indeed, this degenerate age of ours is unworthy the enjoyment of so great a happiness which former ages could boast, when knights-errant took upon themselves the defence of kingdoms, the protection of damsels, the relief of orphans, the punishment of pride and oppression, and the reward of humility."

One finds amazingly egalitarian values displayed by him in his discourse on learning:

"The scope and end of learning, I mean, human learning (in this place I speak not of divinity, whose

---

10 ibid., p. 65  
11 ibid., p. 75  
12 ibid., p. 125  
13 ibid., vol. II, p. 11

272

Centro Virtual Cervantes
aim is to guide souls to heaven, for no other can equal a
design so infinite as that) is to give a perfection to
distributive justice, bestowing upon every one his due,
and to procure and cause good laws to be observed; and
really generous, great, and worthy of high commendation; but yet not equal to that which knight-
errantry tends to, whose object and end is peace, which
is the greatest blessing man can wish for in this life."\(^\text{14}\)

**A little further he says:**

"Blessed be those happy ages that were strangers
to the dreadful fury of these devilish instruments of
artillery, whose inventor I am satisfied is now in hell,
receiving the reward of his cursed invention, which is
the cause that very often a cowardly base hand takes
away the life of the bravest gentleman, and that in the
midst of that vigour and resolution which animates and
inflames the bold, a chance bullet (shot perhaps by one
that fled, and was freighted at the very flash the
mischievous piece gave, when it went off) coming no
body knows how, or from whence, in a moment puts a
period to the brave designs, and the life of one, that
deserved to have survived many years."\(^\text{15}\)

The weakest point discernible in Don Quixote is his
credulousness. As is expected, a gentleman or a knight would
believe people rather than being cynical towards those with whom
he has to interact. That is why Don Quixote can be taken for a ride
by any body who is not lazy enough. It is not surprising that very

---

\(^{14}\) ibid., pp. 314-315

\(^{15}\) ibid., p. 318

273
often Sancho Panza negotiates difficult orders given to him by Don Quixote like delivering letters to his non-existent lady Dulcinea or to find her out so that Don Quixote could have a meeting with her face to face. Panza gets out of the tricky situations by dishing out plain lies to his master. That is why he was successful in making Don Quixote believe that Dulcinea del Toboso had been enchanted and converted into a village wench who could ride an ass and jump from it in one go. Don Quixote had been repeatedly befooled in this way by Sancho Panza and others and he did not even suspect any one even for once. That is precisely why he so readily believed in the phenomena of enchantment, black magic and charms etc. But these are minor drawbacks in a hero of the middle ages who is standing on the threshold of the age renaissance. Sancho Panza gives the following succinct assessment of Don Quixote:

“My master has not one grain of knavery in him; he is as dull as an old cracked pitcher, hurts nobody, does all the good he can to everybody: a child may persuade him that it is night at noonday, and he is so simple, that I cannot help loving him with all my heart and soul, and cannot leave him in spite of all his follies.”

The nobleness, the humanness, the sense of justice, sensitiveness to the sufferings of the downtrodden, the honesty and human sublimeness inherent in Don Quixote find their most eloquent expression in his counselling given to Sancho Panza on the eve of his departure for taking over the governorship of the island of Barataria. In the first part of the instructions, Don Quixote dwells on the moral values which Sancho Panza was advised to uphold. The second part encompasses advice on the code of

16 ibid., p. 80
physical conduct and etiquette. In both the parts, Don Quixote comes out to be an extremely noble soul and an exalted human being, a democratic knight, which may seem rather anachronistic in the Spain of those times. The instructions given by Don Quixote form an impressive catena of ‘dos’ and ‘don’t s’ that are based on his clarity of vision and statesmanship. Sancho Panza is advised not to forget his humble origin and become avariciously over-ambitious. In this context, Don Quixote underlines the significance of virtue which he places on a much higher pedestal than the high origins of a person:

"Be well-pleased with the meanness of thy family, Sancho, nor think it a disgrace to own thyself derived from labouring men; for, if thou art not ashamed of it thyself, nobody else will strive to make thee so. Endeavour rather to be esteemed humble and virtuous, rather than proud and vicious. The number is almost infinite of those who, from low and vulgar births, have been raised to the highest dignities, to the papal chair, and the imperial throne; and this I could prove by examples enough to tire thy patience.

Make virtue the medium of all thy actions, and thou wilt have no cause to envy those whose birth gives them the titles of great men, and princes; for nobility is inherited, but virtue acquired: and virtue is worth more in itself, than nobleness of birth.

If any of thy poor relations come to see thee, never reject or affront them; but, on the contrary, receive and entertain them with marks of favour; in this thou wilt display a generosity of nature, and please Heaven that would have nobody to despise what it has made."
Don Quixote exhorts Sancho Panza not to let "obstinate self-conceit" be his guide as it was "the vice of the ignorant, who vainly presume on their understanding." While delivering justice Sancho Panza is advised to "find out the truth" and not to be biased for or against friends and foes. He should "fix them on the matter of fact." Even the tears of a beautiful woman should not lead him astray and he should "consider sedately her petition" and he should not let "the reason and honesty be lost in her sighs and tears." Similarly he ought not revile "with words those whom their crimes oblige" one "to punish in deed."\(^{17}\)

Don Quixote's expositions on marriage, wife, husband, beauty are simply mesmerising as would be borne out by the following views expressed by him while speaking to he newly married young man Basil:

"If the poor can deserve that epithet, when he has a beautiful wife, is blessed with a jewel: he that deprives him of her, robs him of his honour, and may be said to deprive him of his life. The woman that is beautiful, and keeps her honesty when her husband is poor, deserves to be crowned with laurel, as the conquerors were of old. Beauty is a tempting bait, that attracts the eyes of all beholders, and the princely eagles, and the most high-flown birds stoop to its pleasing lure. But when they find it in necessity, then kites and crows, and other ravenous birds, will all be grappling with the alluring prey. She that can withstand these dangerous attacks well deserves to be the crown of her husband. However, sir, take this along with you, as the opinion of a wise man, whose name I have forgot;\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) ibid., pp. 268-270

276
he said there was but one good woman in the world, and his advice was, that every married man should think his own wife was she, as being the only way to live contented. For my own part, I need not make the application to myself, for I am not married, nor have I as yet any thoughts that way; but if I had, it would not be a woman's fortune, but her character, should recommend her; for public reputation is the life of a lady's virtue, and the outward appearance of modesty is in one sense as good as the reality; since a private sin is not so prejudicial in his world, as a public indecency. If you bring a woman honest to your bosom, it is easy keeping her so, and perhaps you may improve her virtues. If you take an unchaste partner to your bed, it is hard mending her; for the extremes of vice and virtue are so great in a woman. And their points so far asunder, that it is very improbable, I will not say impossible, they should ever be reconciled.”\textsuperscript{18}

Upon hearing these words Sancho Panza is impelled to burst out in awe as he was mesmerised by his master's flash of sheer beauty of words: “Old Nick take him for a knight-errant! I think he is one of the seven wise masters. I thought he knew nothing but his knight-errantry, but now I see the devil a thing can escape him; he has an oar in every man’s boat, and a finger in every pie.”\textsuperscript{19}

Some of the pearls of Don Quixote's wisdom are given below: “retreat – is not to be accounted a flight.”\textsuperscript{20}; “I, for my own

\textsuperscript{18} ibid., p.138
\textsuperscript{19} ibid., p. 139
\textsuperscript{20} ibid., p. 180
part, guided by my stars, follow the narrow track of knight-errantry; and, for the exercise of it, I despise riches, but not honour.”\textsuperscript{21} “Woman and churchman cannot give an affront.”\textsuperscript{22}

The greatest achievement of Cervantes is that he, subverted the normativeness of classicism in terms of strict adherence to the characters to be drawn from the class of aristocracy or gentry that were to inhabit the space of all novels of chivalry, and introduced Sancho Panza, a representative of simple people coming from the milieu of rural folks with all the treasure of concomitant folk wisdom. Indeed in the second volume of the novel Sancho Panza develops into a character who not only was at par with Don Quixote, but he often excelled his master on many a occasion. Indeed, in the second volume there is an interesting episode where there is a discourse going on between Don Quixote and the Knight of The Wood about the Don Quixote’s lady. While the two knights were talking, Sancho Panza butted in and expressed his opinion about the lady under reference. The Knight of the Wood was aghast and he burst out saying:

“\textquote{I never saw a squire,}” said the Knight of the Wood, "\textquote{That durst presume to interrupt his master, when he is speaking himself}'\textsuperscript{23} To this outburst Sancho gave a befitting retort that was flung into the faces of the two knights: “\textquote{Well, well,}” quoit Sancho, “\textquote{I have talked and may talk again, and before as, and perhaps – but I have done; the more ye stir, the more it will stink}.”\textsuperscript{23}

As to Sancho’s credo one finds concrete proof of his folk wisdom and honesty which he displayed when he was being sent as a governor of the land-locked island of Barataria. He unfolded his

\textsuperscript{21} ibid., p. 204
\textsuperscript{22} ibid., p. 205
\textsuperscript{23} ibid., pp. 76-77

278
Don Quixote – a Voyage a la Columbus

credo of governance to the duchess whose husband had made him the governor of the island in the following of words:

"'As for the governing part,' quoth Sancho, 'let me alone, I was ever charitable and good to the poor, and scorn to take the bread out of another man's mouth. On the other side, by our lady, they shall play me no foul play. I am an old cur at a crust, and can sleep dog-sleep when I list. I can look sharp as well as another, and let me alone to keep the cob-webs out of my eyes. I know where the shoe wrings me. I will know who and who is together. Honesty is the best policy. I will stick to that. The good shall have my hand and heart, but the bad neither foot nor fellowship. And in my mind, the main point in this post of governing is to make a good beginning. I will lay my life, that as simple as Sancho sits here, in a fortnight's time he will manage ye this same island as rightly as a sheaf of barley.'"24

While discussing the question of rise of the novel as a genre Mikhael Bakhtin is of the opinion that the rise of the novel is intimately linked with the eras when the absolute monolithic authority of a single language, which is a necessary characteristic of feudal order, is challenged by the emergence of ever new languages as it happened when the dominance of Latin of Hellenistic age was put to an end by the emerging European vernaculars during the age of Renaissance. Apart from this, the fall of the single layered language authoritarianism led to a process of democratization on still another plane: the stifling high style of classicism was seriously challenged by the folk elements which

24 ibid., p. 218
Abhai Maurya

began sprouting, in particular in the parodic genres. While analyzing Rabelais’ *Gaegantua* and *Pantagruel* Bakhtin proved that parody starting from the times of classicism, and traversing its course through the Middle Ages into the time of Renaissance, becomes a striking example of “bivocal” language thanks to its being linked to carnival, in which inheres the counter-culture of laughter. “It is precisely in folk laughter that the authentic popular roots of the novel must be sought”\(^{25}\). Here, the carnival laughter introduced an element of another language in monolithic text of high classical style leading to a sort of multilingualism or, “multivoicedness” or polyphony, which is the fundamental and essential dimension of democratization of a single-layered language or monolithic discourse. In other words, the novel was born in the eras when the process of democratization of language got underway.

In “Don Quixote” the democratization of language and even of values is taking place on a large scale. We have already discussed how the relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panca was based on democratic foundations. More often than not, Sancho Panza discusses various issues with Don Quixote on an equal footing. But the more important aspect in this regard is the language used by Sancho Panca which is a storehouse of expressions drawn from the milieu of simple folks. The use of proverbs and flowery language by Sancho Panza is a running thread throughout the novel, which democratized the language of “Don Quixote” much more effectively than what we saw in Rabelais’ work. The language of Don Quixote is far more polyphonic, multi-voiced and democratized. To that extent it seems to us that “Don Quixote” became a bridge between the novel of

\(^{25}\) Bakhtin M., “Epos i roman”, in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moscow, 1975, p.464

280
chivalry and the modern novel per se and thus completed the process that had started with works like Rabelais' *Gaegantua* and *Pantagruel*. This was certainly a monumental step forward in the evolution of world literature which became possible thanks to a huge contribution made by "Don Quixote".

M. L. Andreev is absolutely right in his conclusion:

"Cervantes, having set a goal before himself, i. e., 'to destroy the tottering giant edifice of the novels of chivalry', nevertheless, has ascribed a huge reserve of positive values not only to his mad ingenious gentleman, but to that literary genre, which he had been fighting, may be, after having endowed him with more lofty, serious and pure idealism than what he had possessed in reality. Precisely from this stand point can "Don Quixote" be read as the last novel of chivalry and, may be, the only one that corresponds to a higher idea of this genre that had not been achieved by any body before Cervantes."

Finally I shall end my paper by mentioning that "Don Quixote" of Cervantes had become a powerful source of inspiration for many a giant in the field of world literature. Victor Shklovsky has justly concluded:

"The power with which Cervantes had studied Don Quixote in a number of episodes was so great that many writers wanted to repeat and they did repeat frequently Cervantes' example. Dostoevsky, while creating the character of prince Myshkin (in "Idiot"

---

A.M.) had all the time Don Quixote at the back of his mind while trying to emulate the hero with such lofty moral ideal"\(^{27}\)

Henry Grattan Doyle in his "Introduction" to the English translation of "Don Quixote" has rightly quoted following words of John Baily, the English critic:

"What had England or France to compare with this beautiful prose of Cervantes which has upon it that instant seal of universality which is the seal of immortality as well? ... Cervantes writes for soldiers and courtiers, gentlemen and servants, scholars and merchants, in fact for men, women and children of all ages, conditions and countries."\(^{28}\)

\(^{27}\) Shklovsky Victor, Izbrannoe..., p. 77
\(^{28}\) Cervantes, Don Quixote, p. ix