

## Social Discourses as a Reflection of Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival: an Analysis of Select Social Practices

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses some social practices or discourses which are prevalent and are still continuing in the society. The close analysis of such rituals or practices helps one to understand that they reflect Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of Carnival, Subversion, Laughter and Grotesque Realism, to an extent. The social discourses may be religious rituals in a community, literature, paintings, films art and so on. According to Bakhtin's theory of Carnival, an eccentric behavior is welcomed and an accepted in carnival and one's natural behavior can be revealed without any consequences. Subversion and laughter are the essential part of our life and art. Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order. The element of carnival introduces many alternatives in a system or society

**KEYWORDS:** Carnival, Subversion, Laughter, Grotesque Realism, Social Discourses, Rituals, Paintings, Films.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This research article titled *Social Discourses as a Reflection of Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival: An Analysis of Select Social Practices* problematizes how some social practices or discourses whether literary or nonliterary are the real reflection of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of Carnival, Subversion, and Grotesque Realism. To an extent, this study is serious as well as funny. It is funny in the sense that the nature of the particular social discourses and cultural practices which I have selected to explain my arguments. It is serious because it has written on the basis of a theoretical study.

Bakhtin was a Russian scholar, philosopher and philologist. His key concepts include Carnival, Subversion, Laughter and Grotesque Realism. Oxford dictionary defines Carnival as an "annual festival, typically during the week before Lent in Roman Catholic countries, involving processions, music, dancing and use of masquerade". Carnival would be the last occasion on which meat was permissible before Easter. By Carnival Bakhtin means the way in which popular humor subverts official authority in classical, medieval and renaissance text and culture. He brought these theories through his classical texts *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Carnavalesque is Bakhtin's term for those forms of unofficial culture that resist official culture, political oppression and totalitarian order through Laughter, Parody and Grotesque Realism. Bakhtin used these terms to describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival in to everyday life, its shaping effect on language and literature. In Bakhtin's view Carnival is an occasion of revelry, merry making and entertainment. But at the same time, Carnivals are symbolic of the disruption and subversion of the then existing authority. Through Carnival some gradual changes can be noticed in the existing hierarchical order of power. Carnival subverts the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos. Carnival is deeply rooted in human psyche on both collective and individual level. It expresses a unified carnival sense of the world.

**Some terms associated with carnival are:**

#### **Inversion/subversion:**

During carnival misery became laughter, hunger became feast, the fool became wise, the beggar became the king and the world was turned upside down. In Carnival there may be free interaction between people. It often brought people together and encouraged the free interaction between people. It often celebrated free expression of people themselves. In Carnival an eccentric behavior is allowed and a person can express his/her natural identity without any further consequences. The familiar nature of carnival allows everything to reunite: high and low, good and bad, old and young etc. In carnival the strict religious rules and respect for official notions of the sacred are stripped of their power. During a carnival the difference between good and bad, high

and low etc. are subverted: for example the king became beggar, fool became wise, and the world was turned upside down.

#### **Laughter:**

The occasion of carnival leads to laughter and ambivalence. The laughter of carnival is ambivalent. In carnival nothing is sacred, no one is exempt and the boundaries of life are transgressed. Carnival contains both the positive and negative elements. It combines elements of diversity and does not end this diversity by imposing authority, instead it celebrates ambivalence. It has the capacity for transformation and mutation.

#### **Grotesque realism:**

The carnival includes grotesque realism. Whenever referring to grotesque realism the lower strata of the body-belly, buttocks and genitals are exposed.

There is no boarder between the audience and performance, everyone and anyone can be part of carnival. There can be no single and central control over the carnival since it is the sum and diversity of its participants.

#### **Analysis of social practices and discourses**

This research article focuses how some social practices truly reflect the theories put forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin. The social practices explained here include religious and social rituals, films and paintings. Here is an analysis of various social practices on the basis of Bakhtin's theories of Carnival, Subversion and Grotesque Realism.

It is interesting to describe a set of paintings (photograph paintings) done by Christina Guggeri, an Italian artist in 2017. Her paintings, titled as 'World Leaders on Toilet', show some of the very unglamorous insight in to the world's most popular leaders. The paintings include Angela Merkel- Chancellor of Germany, Silvio Berlusconi-former prime minister of Italy, the Dalai Lama, Elizabeth II- the queen of England, former US president Barak Obama and Vladimir Putin-the president of Russia. All are seated in toilet.

The paintings humanize world's some of the most famous leaders by imagining how they might look when they answer nature's call. The artistic idea here comes from the fact that of having to get everyone on the same level. Here the subversion of something high to ordinary creates laughter and ultimately reminds one of the grotesqueness of human body. As Bhaktin explained, in grotesque realism certain parts of the body will be referenced. The referenced part of the body may be any part that either protrude from the body or a part that can be entered in to it. Thus, here the paintings of Guggeri can be read as an exaggeration of grotesque realism and thus reveal the absurdity of the hidden truth of the body. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a celebration of the cycle of life: the grotesque body is a comic figure of profound ambivalence. Its positive meaning is linked to birth and renewal, and its negative meaning is linked to death and decay. The paintings by Christina Guggeri reveal the fact, in order to renew our life, it is a must to avoid the waste in the body and thus asserts the inevitability of the process of excretion. The painting here foregrounds the grotesqueness of human body. The essential principal of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is spiritual, noble and ideal to the material or ordinary level. The paintings can be seen as an exaggeration of grotesque realism. In it all that are bodily became grandiose, exaggerated and immeasurable.

This research article also traces out the Carnavalesque feature and the means of subversion involved in 'Bharani Festival' at Trissur district in Kerala. 'Bharani Festival', at Kodungallur Baghavathy temple, is one of the major festivals of Kerala. This festival normally comes between the month of March and April. The festival usually starts with a ritual called 'Kozhikkallumoodal' which involves the sacrifices of cocks and shedding their blood. It is to appease goddess Kali and her demons who take delight in blood offerings.

'Kavutheendal' is another major part of the festival in which the devotees dressed as goddess Kali run around the temple three times with sticks in their hands in a frenzied state. They wave their sword in the air while yelling out abusive cries at the goddess. The bawdy songs that devotees perform are usually termed as 'therippattu'. The word 'therippattu' is a Malayalam word which is a mixture of two Malayalam words 'theri' and 'pattu'. 'Theri in Malayalam language means 'bawdiness' and 'pattu' means 'song'. 'Therippattu' can be considered as an extended version of Bakhtin's theory of carnival. In a carnival an unconventional behavior is accepted without any social interruption and consequences. Here in the performance of festival, the normal status of a person is subverted. For a short while, the devotees become irrational and unreasonable which offers them merriment and relief from the monotonous life. It is Carnavalesque which offers pleasure by subverting one's personality for a short period. Grotesque Realism is also involved in 'Bharani Festival'. Here goddess Kali is represented with more than two eyes, eighteen hands with a small tusk protruding from her mouth. The appearance of Kali in an exaggerated way defines the Grotesque Realism put forwarded by Bakhtin.

The trance of Kali devotees strikes a parallelism with a religious ritual which has been in existence in a particular section of Muslim community for years. They believe in the miracle power of some of their ancestors

who are considered to be the real mouthpieces of God. These section of people consider Khaja Rifayi (Sufi Saint Ahamed –Al—Kabeer) as one of the representatives of God. The people in that community perform a ritual called 'kuthu ratheeb' to invoke Khaja Rifayi. The word 'kuthu ratheeb' is a mixture of Arabic and Malayalam words. The word 'ratheeb' is an Arabic word which means 'something done repeatedly'. 'Kuthu' is from the Malayalam word 'kuthuka' which means 'to stab or to use any weapon upon the body'. They perform acts like piercing their tongue, the ear and stomach with a knife. They believe that the wounds in their body will disappear soon because of the miracle power of Khaja Rifayi. These ritualistic performance can also be included under Carnavalesque.

'Pulikalali' (leopard game) is a folk art or ritual from the state of Kerala. Usually it is performed by trained artists during the occasion of Onam celebrations. Onam is an annual festival celebrated mainly in the Indian state of Kerala. Usually 'Pulikalali' is performed by trained artists on the fourth day of Onam celebrations. Literal meaning of the word 'pulikalali' is the 'play of tigers' but the performance revolves around the theme of hunting. The origin of this folk art can be dated back to over two hundred years. It is Maharaja Sakhtan Thampuran who is said to have introduced this folk art. He wanted to celebrate Onam with a dance that reflected the wild spirit of the force. Later the folk genre was popularized with steps and body language peculiar to a tiger being stalked by hunter, enacting a play of the hunter and the beast.

These 'Pulikalali' dancing can be taken as an example to illustrate Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival, Laughter, and Grotesque Realism. There has been changes in the dressing style and decoration of Pulikalali dancers, over the years. In past, no masks were used by the participants and they used to paint themselves all over their body. But now readymade attires such as masks, cosmetic teeth, tongues, beards and mustaches are used by the participants. The performers also wear a broad belt with jingles around their waist. The festival has now become very famous event, with huge response from people. A striking feature of this art form is the colorful appearance of the performers. A combination of tempera powder and enamel is used to make the paint. In order to apply paint on the body the performers remove their hair from the body. After getting dried the first coat, the second coat of paint is applied with further designs. The performers move in a procession, dancing, pouncing, and shaking their bellies to the beat of the drums through the streets. All these decorations in the body and the way of dressing can be considered as Carnavalesque. There will be scenes such as tiger preying on an animal, and a tiger being hunted by a hunter which will be enacted in between the procession. The painting done on the bodies of performers like tigers with stripes of yellow, red and black are the central attraction. The Swaraj ground in Trissur district plays host to this carnival. People appear in various unique hues masks with locals and visitors also joining on the revelry.

All this attires and adornments are the basic explanation for Bakhtin's theory of Carnival. All the people, irrespective of their status and class, join the festival which exemplifies human beings' crave for revelry. Grotesqueness of body is also foregrounded here, pot belly is one of the attractions in 'Pulikalali'.

Films are the best tools to circulate a particular idea among the society. Other social discourses discussed in this article are two mainstream Malayalam language films. The Malayalam language film 'Kalimannu', directed by Blessy and released in 2014, features some moments in the process of giving birth which caused a culture shock in Kerala. In this sense the film is a Carnavalesque one. It celebrates femininity and exposes something private to the public.

Another film discussed here is 2016 Indian Malayalam language film 'Kammattipadam', directed by Rajeev Ravi, exposes the life of a Dalit person. While analyzing the mainstream films in Malayalam language it is evident that, only fair, handsome and upper caste people took the role of heroes. In contrast to such mainstream films, 'Kammattipadam' features the life of a poor man who is not "fair and handsome" as society defined "fairness". The film subverts the general notion that the so called "fairness and handsomeness" are not the criteria to be the heroes in films. The cinema is highly powerful which develops a democratic outlook by destroying the social constructedness of the concept about a major character in films through the inversion of character roles.

Another example for social discourse included for discussion here is a familiar song in a Hindi language movie, 'The Chennai Express', released in 2013 and directed by Rohit Shetty. The title song in the film revolves around the word 'Lungi'. It is a garment similar to sarong, wrapped around the waist and extending to the ankles. Usually people consider 'Lungis' as garments which are not suitable to worn in public places. But with the introduction and exaggeration of the 'Lungis' in the title song in the particular film helped to raise the status of 'Lungis', at least for a short period. So there is a subversion of something low to high which is a reflection of Bakhtin's theory of Carnival and Subversion. It is a popular humor which subverts official authority or a way of dressing.

The upbringing of Santa Claus in Christmas celebration is another instance of the Carnavalesque. Santa Claus, also known as Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, Saint Nick, is a legendary character originating in western Christian culture. He is said to bring gifts on Christmas evening. In past, Christmas celebration in Europe and America looked very different from today's celebration and cross dressers and carolers roamed the

streets. The modern character of Santa Claus was based on the historical Saint Nicholas (a fourth century Greek bishop and gift giver of Myra). Father Christmas dates back as far as sixteenth century in England during the reign of Henry VIII. During that time he was pictured as a large man in green or scarlet robes lined with fur. He was considered as epitome of peace, joy, good food, wine and revelry. The physical appearance was portrayed as variable. John Leech illustrated Charles Dickens's Santa Claus in *A Christmas Carol (1843)* as a great genial man in a green coat lined with fur, and spreading the essence of Christmas happiness to the people. There are many traditions and rituals associated with the history of Santa Claus. It is said that Santa Claus will enter the dwellings through the chimney and used to share gifts. In the tale of Saint Nicholas, the Saint tossed coins through a window, and, in alter version of the tale, down a chimney when he finds the window locked. The basis of all these stories and tales are man's crave for fantasy and carnival thus to escape from the stark realities of life. Santa's entrance in to homes on Christmas evening via the chimney was made part of American tradition through the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas". In different countries different rituals are associated with Santa Claus. In United States and Canada, children leave a glass of milk and a plate of sweets for Santa to consume. In Britain and Australia beer and sweets are left instead.

After the children have fallen asleep, parents play the role of Santa Claus and leave their gifts under the Christmas tree. 'Ho ho ho' is the way that many languages point out how Santa Claus laughs. It is the textual rendition of a special type of laugh, associated today with Santa. The laughter of Santa Claus has long been an important quality by which the character is recognized. The traditional Christmas poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" which relates that Santa has a little round belly, that shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly. People disguise as Santa and others enjoy the activities of Santa can be considered as an example of Carnavalesque. Everyone knows the story of this jolly Santa, the bringer of gifts. But at the same time everyone knows that this is a performance but not the real one, even though people enjoy it. It is the replication of Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

## II. CONCLUSION

Subversion and laughter are the essential part of our life. Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the existing truth and established order. Through carnival the existing social system can be altered gradually. Through this, society can achieve liberating changes. It acts as a kind of positive and liberating influence. Thus many of the social and cultural practices replicates Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival. In some point Bakhtin's theory of subversion meets the theory of postmodernism. Postmodernism celebrates multiple truths and declines the distinction between high and low, sacred and ordinary etc. in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979)* Jean Francoise Lyotard defines post modernism as the "incredulity towards metanarratives", and it believes in mini narratives which fosters changes in the society. Thus most of the social practices can be explained under the Carnavalesque theory put forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin.

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