

THE CARNIVAL IN *KING LEAR*

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Abstract:

In his *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin states that:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (1984,p. 7-8).

One of the main purposes of carnival is replacing the hierarchical voice. Bakhtin used this term to characterize writing that portrays the de-stabilization or repudiation of power constructs, albeit temporarily, as happens in traditional forms of carnival. This paper attempts to study Shakespeare's *King Lear* under the lens of Bakhtin's "Carnavalesque". The carnival supports the idea of dialogism in which every single voice can be heard without being marginalized or suppressed. William Shakespeare's *King Lear* creates a framework in which the arrangement and stature of the King and queens are degraded while they have always tried to produce monologue, and it is also shown that their decisions are not always correct and ingenuous. The sense of the Bakhtinian carnival can be discovered in this background where both the hierarchical and the lower voices come to the scene and blend together, disrupting the hierarchical construct.

Keywords: Carnival, hierarchy, dialogism, voice, construct.

Shakespeare's *King Lear*, since first presented and published in the early seventeenth century, has been the topic of immense literary interpretation and the focus of targeted critical debate. Shakespeare's tragedies are interpreted into tales of desire and condemnation. If the tragedies are re-analyzed, we understand that Shakespeare presents in his tragedies not this but the "greatness of men set against their helplessness, who are caught in those circumstances which are outside their control", who in Cordelia's words "with the best meaning, have incurr'd the

worst” (King Lear. V. iii. 4). *King Lear* presents a realistic portrait of life, and strikes the reader’s psyche and exemplifies human sentiments, which makes the reader understand that human sufferings at times could be hugely disproportionate to human follies. The critics of Shakespeare’s tragedies are broadly grouped as said by Kiernan Ryan thus:

In the two dominant and complementary interpretive maneuvers, the tragedies are presented either as dramatizing the validity of the established social order and vindicating conventional beliefs and values, or as reconciling us to what is perceived as our intractably flawed human nature, and thus to the inescapable necessity of the given human condition, however monstrous and unbearable its cruelty and injustice. (Ryan 73)

Bakhtin was endeavoring to find literary examples where power was subverted. In order to do so, he traced a concept of the carnival via a reading of the works of Rabelais. The carnival was laughter, the bodily, parody, the ugly, the grotesque, and the so-called ‘low’. The laughter is not sanctioned by the government and it resists control. It is therefore politically subversive. In official cultures, purposes of the body and clowning are not a part and hence, they are vital elements of the carnival. The carnival is the ultimate other. It escapes control, theorization and classification. The carnival is a constructive mode of discussing popular or mass culture because Bakhtin is primarily speaking of the need to subvert and cross-examine established/institutional influence over meaning.

A world upside down is fashioned through the carnival and carnivalesque literature. There is an equal test and contest of ideas and truths, and same dialogic status is demanded by all. Carnival is a metaphor for all such places where the structure is subverted. For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel that one finds the site of resistance to authority and the place where cultural and political change can take place. Since there are no hierarchical positions in a carnival, so ideologies and structures which manifest the mind of individuals cannot exist.

By using the elements of the carnival-like laughter, language, grotesque, subversion of authority Shakespeare forces the audience to hear multiple voices rather than the commands of one unquestioned authority. In *King Lear* lower class characters like the Fool get opportunities to express opinions, judgments and take control over customary and conventional authority figures (TheKing). Bakhtinian carnival comes into play in *King Lear* as hierarchical arrangement is broken down. Different voices come into play and this subverts the power structures. Every voice is heard in the play and that creates a carnivalesque situation.

The king loses his sense as well as his kingdom. The first person to say something which is not expected by the king is Cordelia.

KING LEAR

.....Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR

Nothing!

CORDELIA

Nothing.(Shakespeare 1129)

For a small but powerful moment, Cordelia turns the entire power structure upside down by not telling the king what he wants to hear. Kent also asks the king to change his mind and this is a carnival situation where authority is questioned. In describing the king he uses some low vocabulary like 'old man', 'mad' etc. and this language also adds to the effect of carnivalesque.

The conversation between the king and the Fool is the best example of Carnival in the play. The authority and power structures associated with the king is broken down when the Fool starts talking to the king. The Fool makes fun of the King and the carnival is at its best because the King does not mind a single word that the fool says. The King becomes the fool and the Fool becomes the king. For the fool, the King is even inferior to a fool because he has done something foolish. The Fool judges the King's action of giving away his kingdom to his two unworthy daughters. He even goes to the extent of saying to the King "I'm a fool, thou art nothing". Even Kent says that he is "as poor as the king" and when Lear wants to hire Kent the Fool wants to hire him too.

Fool:

Let me hire him too: here's my coxcomb.

Offering KENT his cap

KING LEAR

How now, my pretty knave! how dost thou?

Fool

Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.(Shakespeare 1135)

And in this way the King is degraded again. The Fool calls the king, "nuncle", teaches the king that he is blind to reality, describes the king as a sweet fool and finally calls him a Fool by giving a reason that he has given away all his titles.

KING LEAR

Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool

All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with (Shakespeare 1135).

The Fool creates a dialogic discourse through which he establishes the fact that even the stupidest things can be done by kings and the conversation atmosphere between the Fool and the King is that of a Carnival where there is unconditional freedom and structures cease to exist. The Fool acts as a commentator on events and is a character not afraid to speak the truth. He does not follow any ideology and discards all appearances of law, justice, and moral order. He sees lust, cruelty, illusions and brute force. He has no illusions and seeks no consolation in the presence of any kind of order which rewards Good and Punishes evil. The breaking down of hierarchies and carnivalesque does not happen to the king alone; it also happens to both the queens when they lose their power.

King Lear presents ideas of what it means to be actually human. When Lear loses his symbols of status and is cast out onto a heath in a storm, Lear's closest companions are a fool and later, a madman (Edgar). And in the storm scene with his minimum clothes where his body is almost bare, Lear is able to empathize with each living component of the world. And this again is a carnivalesque situation where you become one with humanity, feel the pain and joy which every human feels. The motifs of cursing and of laughter are more or less a subject of the distortedness or grotesqueness of the body.

The language used by the Fool and Edgar is common marketplace language. It subverts the structure of the high class language which everyone else uses. It is different from a regular language. Dialogism subverts the objectifying tendencies of ruling discourse and a theoretical description of all languages.

Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque can be read as a perfect antidote to a severe form of power everywhere and a celebration of the possibility for positive change, however transient in nature. *King Lear* shows us a world where transgressive social behavior lives beneath the surface of social order, continually threatening to overturn things. Carnivalesque can be taken as licensed disobedience. The elements of carnivalesque in *King Lear* also makes it clear that set rules, orders, and beliefs were not immune to ridicule or questioning at carnival time. The Fool can question and judge the King and that is the true liberating prospective of the carnivalesque. It cleared the ground for new ideas to enter into public discourse, and Bakhtin goes so far as to suggest that the European Renaissance itself was made possible by the spirit of free-thinking and impiety that the carnivals engendered.

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