

The Sprit of “Carnavalesque” in Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground beneath Her Feet*

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Abstract: *Mikhail Bakhtin popularized the term “carnavalesque” through his Rabelais and His World. Salman Rushdie, as any other magical realist, makes this an important ingredient of his fiction. Carnavalesque adds that extra dimension to life as it often tends to break off from the routine and mundane. People in the postmodern world crave for exquisite sensations and as a result, bizarre and grotesque game shows and entertainments and e-games have found their ways into the lives of the people. The present paper, in its two sections, shows i) the aspects of carnivalesque and ii) how it is exploited in The Ground Beneath Her Feet.*

Key Words: *carnavalesque- postmodern world- grotesque- protest- freedom- revelry- spectators- actors- infotainment- festivals- extravagance- theatre- politics*

Introduction:

Carnavalesque spirit is common in the postmodern and magical realist fiction. The term “carnival” came to have particular prominence in literary criticism after the publication of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. Carnival features as a utopian irruption into the routine world. For David M. Boje, carnivalesque is the “use of theatrics to face off with power via satire and parody, and invite spectators to a new reading of the spectacle of global capitalism”(1). The carnivalesque can be grotesque, violent or quite peaceful. In the midst of media dominated by spectacle, advertising, infotainment, and purchased by transnational power, carnivalesque gains added significance.

Aspects of carnivalesque:

Carnavalesque involves festivity and merrymaking. It is mixed with fun and humour, even sexual exhibition meant to jolt power into awareness of its psychic organization. There is an explosion of freedom involving laughter, mockery, dancing, masquerade and revelry. It involves occupation of the streets in which the symbols and ideals of authority are subverted and satirized with irony. One cannot watch carnival as a by-stander, but has to take part as a ‘spect-actor’.

Carnival is a safety valve, a way for the oppressed masses to blow off some steam, and not erupt into revolution. The extravagant juxtapositions, the grotesque mixing and

confrontations of high and low, upper-class and lower-class, spiritual and material, young and old, male and female, daily identity and festive mask, serious conventions and their parodies, gloomy medieval time and joyous utopian visions- indeed the whole idea of bringing life "down to earth" is the concept that is central to the carnival.

Carnival in the present paper means any kind of gathering, celebration, protest and the like where a number of people commingle. Carnival, in the modern context, revolves much around politics (protests, processions and campaigning). Theatre is another centre of carnival where again people crowd and mix as they become social centres for dating and meeting.

In fiction that engages carnivalesque, language is used extravagantly extending its resources beyond what is actually required. There is more spending than hoarding of resources. At the level of both the plot and the language of narration, there is extravagance, an antithesis to the more utilitarian mode of western capitalist enterprise. Here, 'brevity is not the soul of wit.'

Faris observes: "*Midnight's Children* is perhaps the most carnivalesque of all, in its conscious adoption of the style of a Bombay Talkie--a cast of thousands, songs, dances, exaggeratedly sumptuous scenarios, horrifying blood and gore" (185). This kind of baroque mode of over extension is common in carnivalesque fiction.

There is always numerical excess. There are many characters and events described. The writer of carnivalesque fiction is in love with words. His mind is like a horse with no reins. He is for the uncontrolled celebration of life.

Bakhtin insists that within the scatological writing of Rabelais exist the necessary evidence to discover the history of folk humour, as well as the shocking practice of the Renaissance carnival. The Renaissance carnival culture involves the temporary suspension of all hierarchical distributions and barriers among men and the prohibition of usual life. Bakhtin divides the carnivalesque into three forms: visual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate or abusive language. The themes of carnival twist mutate and invert standard themes of societal makeup. The traditions of carnivalesque mock those in authority and parody official ideas of society, history and fate.

However private a person maybe or prefer to be, the society comes bursting in, in a large way. It seeks outlet and relief in whatever form available. Carnavalesque offers a chance for people to release their pent up emotion and to settle scores with oppressive forces. Whenever there is a chance, people throw in themselves and become a part of the spectacle.

Carnavalesque in *The Ground beneath Her Feet*:

The Ground beneath Her Feet is a love story about two rock idols – Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. This focuses on rock music as Rushdie has written lyrics with Irish singer Bono for

U 2 Album. This novel explores the theme of family, love, fame, myth and history. There is a fine blend of fact and fiction. This is a loosely retold version of 'Orpheus' myth. It explores Orpheus-Eurydice myth in contemporary setting. This is set in the world of hedonistic rock stars with a mixture of mythology and elements from the repertoire of science fiction. But instead of Orpheus saving Eurydice, Vina saves Ormus from the trauma of a car accident which has given him the ability to see into a parallel world, a kind of double vision. The novel is narrated by Rai, a photographer who is also in love with Vina. He follows the two musicians and chronicles their rise to fame and about the invasion of the Indian Rock band called VTO into America led by Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. *The Ground beneath Her Feet* is about an international "pop culture" best exemplified by Rock music. This gist of the novel reveals that there is a lot of scope for "carnavalesque" in this novel.

Cricket, the modern carnival, finds place in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* also. Cricket and colonialism cannot be separated. Englishmen have left behind two of their legacies, besides many other things, in all their colonies--English and Cricket. Darius the cricket lover goes to play cricket in a pentangular tournament.

On the Maidan, a large, noisy crowd awaited his coming. Sir Darius had always disapproved of the behaviour of Bombay's spectators. It was the one small blemish on these otherwise delightful days. The hooting, the shrieking, the blaring of tin horns, the banging of *dhols*, the rising chant as a pace merchant ran in to bowl, the barracking, the cries of snack vendors, the howling laughter, in short the incessant clamour, created. (GHF 28)

The carnival hungry modern public flocks to the stadiums to witness and enact the game vicariously. They do not mind about the money and time that they throw in for this great source of entertainment. Offices and educational institutions sport a deserted look on the days of the matches. Institutions like BCCI thrive with the carnivalesque spirit of the people.

The need for living the life, celebrate and experience various aspects of it is not restricted to reality. It is extended to dreams and imagination as well. This aspect is brought forth thus:

In our dreams; alone in our beds (because we are all alone at night, even if we do not sleep by ourselves), we soar, we fly, we flee. And in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks. What we forbid ourselves we pay good money to watch, in a playhouse or movie theatre, or to read about between the secret covers of a book. Our libraries, our palaces of entertainment tell the truth. The tramp, the assassin, the rebel, the thief, the mutant, the outcast, the delinquent, the devil, the sinner, the traveller, the gangster, the runner, the mask: if we did not recognize in them our least-fulfilled needs, we would not invent

them over and over again, in every place, in every language, in every time. (GHF 78-79)

Rushdie tries to expose the pretensions and hypocrisy of the people. What is shunned by the people in the public may be the one that is the most wanted in private. People experience many things that cannot be done normally but only vicariously and in their dreams.

The din and buzzle of Bombay life is beyond compare. Life is always seen at its highest ebb. Rai, the narrator of *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, records it thus:

I yearned for the city streets, the knife grinders, the water carriers, the Chowpatty pickpockets, the pavement moneylenders, the peremptory soldiers, the whoring dancers, the horse-drawn carriages with their fodder-thieving drivers, the railway hordes, the chess players in the Irani restaurants, the snake buckled school children, the beggars, the fishermen, the servants, the wild throng of Crawford Market shoppers, the oiled wrestlers, the moviemakers, the dockers, the book sewers, the urchins, the cripples, the loom operators, the bully boys, the priests, the throat slitters, the frauds. I yearned for life. (GHF 86)

Rai, being in America, misses all Indian throng and fun. He deeply yearns for life, as he acknowledges in the above passage. Such variety is typical of the third world. There are many in India who are just 'loose' and hence simply hang around.

Rai's Bombay, through his lens, grows expressionistic and stares at him. Through his lens he wants to focus on something juicy. But as life is full, everything seems important. The busy crowded life in India is diverse with variety:

There were whores, tightrope walkers, transsexuals, movie stars, cripples, billionaires, all of them exhibitionists, all of them obscure. There was the thrilling, appalling infinity of the crowd at Churchgate Station in the morning, but that same infinity made the crowd unknowable; there were the fish being sorted on the pier at the Sassoon dock, but all the activity showed me nothing: it was just activity. Lunch runners carried the city's tiffin boxes to their destinations, but the boxes guarded their mystery. There was too much money, too much poverty, too much nakedness, too much disguise, too much anger, too much vermilion, too much purple. There were too many dashed hopes and narrowed minds. There was far, far too much light. (GHF 231)

Life is seen at its fullest in the villages of India. It is always thick, busy, wanting, amoral and full of filth and squalor. People move ceaselessly with no particular destination in mind.

The road never emptied: Bikes, horse-drawn carts, burst pipes, the blare of buses and trucks. People, people. Roadside saints in plaster. Men in a circle at dawn pissing on an ancient monument, some dead king's tomb. Running dogs, lounging cattle, exploded rubber tyres prominent among the piles of detritus that were everywhere, like the future. Groups of youths with orange headbands and flags. Politics painted on passing walls. Tea stalls. Monkeys, camels, performing bears on a leash. A man who pressed your trousers while you waited. Ochre smoke from factory chimneys. Accidents. *Bed On Roof* Rs.2/-. Prostitutes. The omnipresence of gods. Boys in cheap rayon bush shirts [...]. The roaches, the beasts of burden, the enervated parrots, fought for food, shelter, the right to see another day of life. The young men with their oiled hair strutted and preened like skinny gladiators, while the old watched their children suspiciously, waiting to be abandoned, to be shouldered aside, tossed into some ditch. This was life in its pure form, life seeking no more than to remain alive. (GHF 259)

Everywhere around Rai, in the villages, life is found to be striving and pullulating. Life is never still and the spirit of carnivalesque keeps people indulged and on the move all the time regardless of any necessity or compulsion.

American music presents a variety which has sucked in all the bests in the world. America is the modern melting pot. Its music has the drums of Africa, the Polish dances, the Italian weddings, and the drunken rhythm of Salsa saints (GHF 276). America grows as it incorporates the best of everything and is proud of providing the best 'pop music' the world wants.

The media celebrates the modern carnival. In the days of Ormus Cama, there was only radio and live shows. In the presence of strict censorship pirate radio and radio-talk thrived (GHF 311). People want their desires to be fed and nurtured. When the law hinders it, they seek gratification in an unlawful manner. Carnivalesque and censorship are always seen at logger heads.

Live music shows are real modern carnivals. The electric guitar really electrifies the crowd. Ormus has the crowd in his grip. He is seen as the music icon of the times.

Legs planted wide apart, golden guitar sparkling in his hand, tall, thin, his face like a monument to his long wait and belated triumph, the golden eye patch adding to the power of the persona, lending it piratical overtones, he represented the danger and realism of the music as well as its underlying hope. (GHF 467)

The celebration of life, of music, continues. Vina is no more but Vina's Music goes on. "Her voice is doing extra-ordinary things--new and familiar--with the song's melodic line,

stretching and bending the sound, bringing a jazzy feel to it” (GHF 571). The invisible crowd goes crazy over her celebratory music. It pulsates to the throb of it.

Conclusion:

Protests--both social and political--celebration of life, processions, parties and get-togethers, exhibitions, cricket, theatre, musical extravaganzas, and verbal exaggerations are instances of carnivalesque that have been analysed in this paper.

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