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Grotesque Elements in Basheer's The World Renowned Nose

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Abstract

Grotesque Realism is one of the important features of Carnival. It presents human body as multiple, incomplete and imperfect and thereby it subverts what is ideal, stable and perfect. As it is a part of Carnival, grotesque representation is basically a revolutionary action. It not only questions the existing hierarchical social structure, it also creates new formula which is egalitarian in nature. The present paper analyses how the famous Malayalam novelist and short story writer Vaikom Muhammed Basheer has made use of the technique of grotesque realism in his novel *The World Renowned Nose* (*ViswaVikyadhamayaMookk*). The story focuses on the growth of a nose which has become a matter of dispute and sensation among intellectuals. Basheer also gives a touch of satire and black humour to the story.

Key words: Grotesque, Bakhtin, Basheer, Satire, Carnavalesque

Article

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary critic has contributed many an important and interesting concepts to literary theory. His theory of carnivalesque which is basically a literary mode that subverts and liberates the notions of the dominant discourse is one among them. It deals with the lower stream of culture as opposed to the uniform, official and high culture. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines the term carnival as “a public festival usually one that happens at a regular time each year, that involves music and dancing in the streets for which people wear brightly coloured clothes”. But to Bakhtin Carnival is more than mere a public festival. Basically Carnival is revolution, a way of life and a mode of language that breaks and goes beyond all official notions, moral principles, ethical and behavioral codes. It destroys the prevailing hierarchical social structure and creates a new egalitarian relation. To Bakhtin the term carnival is not a simplistic one at all; it is highly suggestive and which signifies a variety of things apart from what it originally meant in medieval times. Bakhtin explores his notions of the carnivalesque in his seminal work *Rabelais and his world*. Even though Bakhtin and his theories were unknown or neglected for long times, the representation of the life and society in a carnivalesque mode is not a new trend or development in works of art. It can be seen even in the writings of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden and Jonathan Swift. The cultural performances like Theyyam and Koodiyattam also present the society as subversive and carnivalesque. It is also notable that in the present era the theory of carnivalesque is used as a prominent strategy across the cultures. Among them Angela Carter, Ralph Ellison and Salman Rushdie are the major figures. In Malayalam Literature Vaikom Muhammed Basheer is the prominent writer who used this technique even before studies on the theory were done. Humour and laughter are the major tools put forward by Bakhtin for the carnivalesque subversion. Carnival laughter is festive laughter; it is not an individual reaction to any comic event but it appeals to the mass. During carnival official authority is subverted mostly by laughter. Carnival laughter is of a transgressive kind for it overcomes all prohibitions and limitations formulated and imposed by the official world and it also has the potential to bring changes upon society. Another important characteristic feature of carnivalesque is the grotesque realism which is also collective in nature. The central principle of grotesque realism is degradation and belittlement of all that is generally believed to be high and noble. It destabilizes what is abstract, spiritual and stable. Grotesque realism presents human body as multiple, incomplete

and imperfect. The grotesque body is always in the process of becoming. As opposed to the typical perfect body parts, it is ugly and unpleasant to look at. But at the same time it attracts and amuses people and no one sympathizes with it. In human body the lower parts like legs, feet, belly, buttocks and genitals are given prominence than upper parts in the grotesque representation. Most often the grotesque body is an outgrowth in the human body which is a symbolic of the outgrowth of all limits. It also challenges the notions and realities constructed about the human body. Through this it crosses all boundaries and accepted behavioral patterns. According to Bakhtin the grotesque imagery is a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The coherence of the body is possible only relative to the fragmented condition of it. Grotesque image not only makes it perfect, it also reminds of its imperfection and incoherence. The representation of body and world in the grotesque genre is quite different from that of the classic and naturalist images. Of all the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body; the head and ears also acquire a grotesque character when they adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects. The grotesque is the basis of all abuses, uncrowning, feasting and impertinent gestures (as pointing at the nose or the buttocks, spitting and others). Bakhtin also explains the presence of body – particularly grotesque – in the day to day speech of human beings in his work Rabelais and his world. Whenever men laugh and curse, particularly in a familiar environment, their speech is filled with bodily images. The body copulates, defecates, overeats and men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouth and dismemberment parts.

When he talks about sources of the grotesque body Mikhail Bakhtin mentions that the grotesque concept of the body lived especially in the familiar and colloquial form of the language as opposed to that of the official and standard. The legend of giants can be seen as one of the sources of the grotesque body. The legend always finds a visible, obvious support in the physical setting; the dismembered, scattered or flattened body of the giant is discovered in the natural landscape. Another important source for grotesque bodily images is the cycle of legends and literary works related to the so-called Indian wonders. It includes the extra ordinary bodily forms of inhabitants in India and other third world countries. The extra ordinary beings are the creatures having a distinctive grotesque character. Some of them are half human, half animal. It is to be noted here that the showcasing of Indian dwarfs was a major event in Europe in the colonial period. This particular event had an important role in the identity formation of the colonized people. Besides these the comic performers of the market place also were an important source of the grotesque image of the body. They formed a huge and motley world. All of its members including jugglers, acrobats, vendors of panaceas, clowns, trainers of monkeys, had a sharply expressed grotesque bodily character. Even today these characters are most fully preserved in market place and they have gained the importance in Bakhtinian reading of the Carnavalesque. In oral popular comic repertory too we find the reflection of the grotesque concept of the body: specific obscenities, debasing parodies, abuse and cursing and dismembered parts. In his study of carnival Bakhtin observes that the comic folk element was one of Rabelais' main sources the grotesque representation.

The present paper analyses how Vaikom Muhammed Basheer has treated the grotesque in his story *The World Renowned Nose*. The story is remarkable for its carnivalesque image particularly the representation of the grotesque body. The protagonist of the story-Mookkan (Long Nose) is a grotesque figure. The story is about a nose which has become a matter of dispute and sensational news among intellectuals. In the very outset itself Basheer makes effective use of carnivalesque techniques by selecting a hero who is merely a cook or a kitchen worker, and his nose which is rather a minor part of the body. "The owner of that world-renowned nose is man of twenty four when the story begins. No one knew him before that." The protagonist who belongs to the lower strata of society becomes famous only because of his grotesque nose. Being a rustic, to become famous is a distant dream for him; but one day an amazing thing happened in his life which was undermining and subversive to the official and the established system. "His nose grew slightly in length. It passed his mouth

and reached the level of his chin. The nose began to grow in length every day”. This is extra-ordinary and non-normal. As mentioned earlier the grotesque body is in the process of becoming. It is incomplete and imperfect. This typical incompleteness brought him complete burden in his life. And for Mookkan it was impossible to hide the grotesque nose from the public. Here Basheer uses another technique- Satire -which is also one of the main features of Bakhtinian Carnival. The dismissal of the protagonist from his job and the following incidents make the issue a public one. Carnival is characteristically public, not a personal issue. It is worth noticing that even though different kinds of people visited him from different parts of the world, no one came forward to save him from the loss of his job. No one enquired about his tiredness and problems. The satire reaches at its height when author asks rhetorically if he was a wild animal to be kept starving. Mookkan was treated like an animal in the zoo.

Basheer depicts the scene of visiting of the people realistically in the story. For them it is a carnival time. They are free to come and touch the grotesque nose. No restriction was imposed on them at first. People came visiting night and day time to see the long-nosed one and his nose. It is reported that during such visits lots of things were stolen from Mookkan's house. The reference about stealing and theft in the story is important because it is a way to make the story a farcical humour. Theft and stealing can be considered as features of carnivalesque literature, because during carnival everyone is free and ecstatic. The question of punishment, law and order are irrelevant in such a condition. The protagonist refers them (people) as “Mooshettakal” in the story. The Malayalam word “Mooshettakal” stands for an evil deity. In the present context it is used as a contemptuous abuse which refers to the disturbing people. And it is a very colloquial usage as well. In *The World Renowned Nose* carnival becomes a political issue when the author writes about the political parties who are protesting against the government in the name of nose. The presentation of carnival as a political issue is something unique to Basheer. Here the hero and his grotesque nose become a tool to fight against the government. Basheer reveals the fact that though the government is well established with its rigid rules and regulations it can be dismantled at any time just by using the minor part of the body and that too of a man of no importance. Being carnivalesque in nature, the story assures that the government, officialdom, authority and norms and rules are just fake; not as firm as they believed to be.

When Basheer says the long nose is the symbol of greatness he is actually putting the formal notions upside down. To possess such a nose is shame and non-normal but in the story it makes the protagonist great and renowned one. He becomes a celebrity without whom nothing happens in the society. His presence and words were considered to be valuable. The grotesque as a political issue continued in the story led by the institutions like government and political parties and authority. Many conspiracies were planned to capture the long nosed one. The first conspiracy was hatched by the government itself. The government awarded him a little title “Chief among the long-nosed ones” and gave him a medal. He was awarded for being the most grotesque man among the grotesque people as the Malayalam saying goes- *Mookkilla Rajyathe Murimookkan Rajavu*. Here the government which is supposed to be model and creative is being laughed at by the author. In the award distributing ceremony the President himself pins the title on the long nose. He doesn't shake hands with Mookkan but tweaks his nose in affection and admiration. Instead of giving awards to the meritorious and creative people the government appreciates a man of no importance and for his defect. The protagonist's nose began to grow because of some defects; it was not a result of his hard work or continuous effort. There are so many people in the society with varieties of defects. How can a government award such people? They deserve help and support, not awards and recognitions. Here the government, authority and officialdom become part of the carnival which propagates total freedom and subversion from what is being called normal.

Basheer satirizes the way people treat Long Nose when he becomes a rich man. He has two beautiful ladies appointed as his secretaries. Both of them worshipped Long Nose very much and competed each other to get his affection. Even though he

is illiterate and ugly with his nose reaching down his navel, the ladies fight each other to get his heart. This shows that money is the only criterion for affection and love. These ladies become mediators to fulfill the hidden agenda of the political parties. Different political parties tried their best to make Long Nose 'their' man. A leading party made a slogan making use of Mookkan's greatness but without his permission. The slogan is "Our party is the Long-nosed one's party; the long-nosed one's party is the people's party." Being angry and growing enmity other parties bribed one secretary to issue a statement saying that Long Nose is fraud and his nose is not genuine but made of rubber. As a result the protagonist Long Nose was arrested and doctors had to make a physical test to see whether the nose was made of rubber or not. They found that to be an original one and then Long Nose was nominated as the Member of Parliament. A grotesque nose creates unending rivalry between two leading political parties and it affects the government and even the whole country. They are too stupid and Lilliput like to run in the back of these silly matters. This reminds Pope's famous mock heroic narrative poem Rape of the Lock in which he satirizes man's nature of fighting for minor incidents. The question of originality of a nose that is too grotesque becomes the burning issue in the nomination of an M.P. This incident might be purposefully included by the author to mock at the realities in the world's largest democracy. In *Gulliver's Travels* too two countries fight each other for silly reasons. This is a universal phenomenon that persists regardless of time and space. When the originality of the nose became under threat, collective consciousness of the mass began to work out. They burned public vehicles and quite a number of men and women died as martyrs in the fight for the long nose. During the carnival time the mob psychology dominates. The personal issue becomes a social issue. Everyone is ready to do anything for the group. Towards the end of the novel Basheer satirizes the conferring of D. Lit. to the grotesque hero by the universities.

Throughout the story it is evident that Basheer tries to subvert the established notions of the high culture. Things considered as the part of high culture and officialdom are destroyed and made available to the middle and lower class people as well. The very notion of high culture is under threat. In the story the lower strata of the society and their ideas are highlighted. Their styles, ways of living, language, mental makeup and reaction are shown and this is particular to the carnivalesque mode.

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