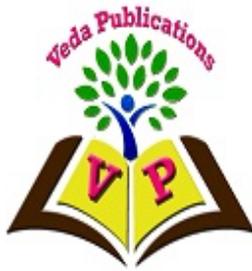


**CARNIVAL AND THE GROTESQUE IN JAMES JOYCE'S ULYSSES**

Dr Nisha Francis Alapatt

*(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vimala College.)*Email: [drnishafranc@gmail.com](mailto:drnishafranc@gmail.com)DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2018.53101>**ABSTRACT**

Carnival originates from the Latin word "carnem levare" which means "to take away or remove meat." The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines "carnival" as "the merrymaking and festivity that takes place in many Roman Catholic countries in the last days and hours of the pre-Lenten season". Thus, carnival had a religious and social origin. According to the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin the expressions of folk culture manifested through carnival practices entered literature through the folkloric genres of antiquity like the Socratic Dialogue and Menippean Satire. He explains this in his book *Rabelais and His World*. In this book, he also discusses the process of "carnivalization of literature" and demonstrates that the study of folk culture is integral to the study of the novel.

**Keywords :** *Carnival, Grotesque, Lent, Folk, Abundance, Merrymaking, Carnivalization, Socratic Dialogue, Menippean Satire.*



The article examines James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a carnivalesque text incorporating the grotesque. It is a fact that both the Russian writer Mikhail Bakhtin and the Irish writer James Joyce had some formal similarities in their literary career. Bakhtin's doctoral dissertation *Rabelais and His World* faced an initial ban and so did James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. While Bakhtin develops a theory of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, Joyce exemplifies it in *Ulysses*. Critics Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist in their book *Mikhail Bakhtin* write that James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a book that describes carnival (317).

Carnival is not actually a literary phenomenon. It had a religious origin. Carnival was celebrated on the day prior to the commencement of the fasting and prayer days of Lent. Huge quantities of food, meat and drinks, which were not permitted during the Lent, were consumed on the day of carnival. Food, drink and merrymaking thus became integral to carnival. During carnival, people indulged themselves in festivities of all sorts. There were also carnivals that coincided with the feast of saints.

Bakhtin defines carnival as [...] a pageant without footlights and without division into performers and spectators. [...] its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*. Because carnivalistic life is a life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent "life turned inside out," "the reverse side of the world" (*monde à l'envers*) (PDP 122).

Carnival lasts only for a brief period of time and the temporal boundary of carnival is strictly followed. During carnival, there is no division into actors and

performers or to the theatre and the stage. Everyone participates in the carnival and all events of carnival take place on the carnival square. All rules are suspended in carnival and "misrule" dominates the time of carnival. Thus, carnival opposes the strict rules of the "authoritarian culture" and represents a life of freedom from the "official" life. It was the carnival culture that brought in laughter even in the midst of official, ecclesiastical and feudal culture.

Laughter alone has the capacity to destroy the distance, fear and piety regarding anything. The basic concept in carnival is the diminishing of epic distance through laughter. Thus, carnival became the festive life of the people organised on the basis of laughter. James Joyce's comic rewrite of the ancient epic *Odyssey* reduces the epic distance associated with the Homeric epic. This modern *Odyssey* is a "carnival legend" of an ordinary man named Leopold Bloom. In his novel *Ulysses*, Joyce debases and brings the epic hero Odysseus down to earth by "making him familiar and by humanising him" (PDP133).

The manifestations of folk culture seen in ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and in various genres of the billingsgate also can be seen in carnival. The "feast of fools" and the "feast of the ass" are two 'rituals' associated with carnival processions. In the "feast of fools", a fool or a clown is elected as the king in place of the actual ruler. He will preside over the activities of the carnival and everything is seen in a comic perspective by the newly elected "foolish" king. The ritual of the "feast of the ass" in carnival arises from the importance given to the ass in the New Testament. The Scriptures record two important journeys on the ass: the flight of infant Jesus from Herod and the



ceremonial approach of Jesus to Jerusalem on an ass. The ass, a lowly animal is thus elevated to the position of the vehicle for the king.

“Mock crowning” and ‘decrowning’ are the primary ‘acts’ in carnival. Along with this, we see carnival ‘gestures’ like “free and familiar contact” and “carnivalistic mesalliances.” Eccentricity, profanation of sacred things, the abusive use of language or the use of the language of the Billingsgate are all part of carnival. *Ulysses* is replete with carnival festivities and rituals and the novel extensively uses the language of Billingsgate.

Mock kings and queens are elected to preside over the carnival feasts and everyone appears in carnival costumes. The ritual of the “crowning of the feast of fools” is common in carnival celebrations. In the “feast of fools,” a fool or a clown is elected as the king. The election of the “fool king” is only for the period of carnival and he is decrowned and stripped of his regal vestments and is given the old garb of the clown or fool immediately after the time of carnival is over. A situation parallel to the “feast of fools” takes place in the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*. Bloom, who is declared a public nuisance to the citizens of Dublin is elected as a suitable candidate to the post of the Lord Mayor of Dublin. Bloom’s coronation is the parody of the coronation of Edward VII. Church bells ring in the neighbouring churches to announce the coronation. The new city Bloomusalem turns out to be a parody of the New Jerusalem mentioned in the book of Revelations in the Bible. The “feast of fools” concludes with the “decrowning” and “disrobing” ceremony, which restores the crowned persona to his former self. The “Circe” episode of the novel can be considered as a

chapter that stands apart as a representative of carnival inside the text. This chapter takes a release from all textual, temporal, spatial, ethical and sartorial restraints.

Feasts are also equally important to carnivals. Food and drink form an integral part of both church carnival and secular carnival. People attended the official feasts in the Middle Ages in their livery and strict hierarchical order was maintained on the dining tables. During the carnival feasts, this order or rank was not maintained and people sat on the same table and even ate from the same plate. Buck Mulligan’s shout at the beginning of the novel that “the bards must drink and junket” (*Ulysses* 15) sets the appropriate carnivalesque mood in *Ulysses*.

The “cattle slaughtering feast” is an important event of carnival. This feast known for its abundance and excess, enjoyment and merrymaking and the huge consumption of meat and drinks. Though not of the dimension of the cattle slaughtering feast, we hear references to the “slaughtering day” (Friday) in *Ulysses*. Bloom sees the huge number of cattle taken for this and thinks of the good meat one might get on this day. According to the third precept of the holy Catholic Church, the devotees should abstain from eating meat on Friday. Then the day on which all the activities in the novel take place i.e, Thursday, June 16 acquires the nature of a carnival day. In this sense, we can account for the “excesses” in the novel and explain how the novel itself embodies a carnivalesque culture in its very structure.

The carnival festivities are restricted in time. As in folk carnivals, the carnival in *Ulysses* begins and ends with the chiming of bells in the Glasnevin



Church near Bloom's house. The parody of the feast of the Corpus Christi is an integral part of carnivals. As mentioned in *Ulysses*, the last feast of ascension was on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Accordingly, the feast of Corpus Christi would be observed on June 16, the day of the textual carnival.

The liberties of societal carnival have greatly influenced literature. The influence of carnival on literature is called "carnivalization of literature" and the literature influenced by elements of carnival is called "carnivalized literature". The carnival life reached its pinnacle of glory during the Renaissance and showed a decline after Renaissance. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> C, carnival was the direct source of carnivalization of literature but from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> C onwards, carnivalized literature became the source of carnivalization of literature.

Bakhtin finds the roots of "carnivalized literature" in the serio-comical genres of ancient times like the "Socratic dialogue" and the "Menippean Satire". The common feature of the serio comical genres is the "contemporisation" of myths and legends, the rejection of the stylistic unity of canonical genres like the epic, the tragedy and the lyric, the free invention of characters and a multi-toned narration mixing the high and low, serious and comic (PDP 108).

In *Ulysses*, we can see the influence of both social carnival practices and serio comical genres, as well as carnivalized literature like Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

## GROTESQUE REALISM

The literary representation of folk culture is called "grotesque realism". According to Kershner, writers like Rabelais embody the spirit of carnival in their works through parody and through the use of grotesque realism which reduces all 'higher' issues to the 'material bodily lower stratum'(16). The grotesque is opposed to anything that is static or permanent. The grotesque body always tries to transgress its boundaries by growing into the bodily convexities and orifices. The bowels, the phallus, the gaping mouth, the nose and the anus erase the boundaries between the body and the world (*Rabelais* 317). In grotesque literature, these organs and their functions like eating, drinking, defecation, copulation, pregnancy and childbirth and other acts of elimination like sweating, blowing of the nose and sneezing are hyperbolised. Fertility, growth and abundance are the main themes of the grotesque body. The grotesque canon is opposed to the classical or modern aesthetic canons which are more or less similar in spirit. The grotesque canon always discusses the lower and earthly regions whereas the classical canon discusses the upper realm of the earth and the body. Joyce's novel *Ulysses* embodies the carnival spirit and grotesque realism through its overindulgence in the detailed representations of the human body and its mockery of religion, nation and language.

The critic Matthew Hodgart sees in *Ulysses* "collections of popular culture" (35) and it is possible to treat *Ulysses* as a specimen of grotesque literature. The laws of canonical literature are not applicable to grotesque literature as it defies all norms of canonical literature. The "grotesque canon"



is non canonical and deviates from all norms of classical literature. Patrick Parrinder, in his essay "Joyce and the Grotesque" writes that *Ulysses* is "full of grotesque humour, much of it based on incongruous views of the body" (10). This stress on the "body" can be seen in Joyce's choice of an organ for each chapter in *Ulysses*.

An inherent duality and ambivalence can be seen in the nature of man. He is sober and serious on one side and humorous on the other side. In the public sphere, people hide their true selves and appear dignified in front of others while they often indulge in impolite and rude activities in their personal life and talk. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom is well mannered and polished outside, but his unrestricted thoughts often verge on indecency and blasphemy. Even though the grotesque images remain ugly, monstrous or hideous in comparison to the "classic" or the "aesthetic" images, they are invaluable for the regenerating power in them. Joyce might be unconsciously responding to the carnival spirit within his creative personality when he wrote *Ulysses*.

The similarities between the writers Francois Rabelais and James Joyce cannot go unnoticed in this context. Both these writers were critical of the existing official, ecclesiastical and feudal cultures. Both the writers used a language which bore close affinity to the language of the carnival. Joyce makes a Rabelaisian protest against the official language when he takes the "Irishman's revenge against King's English". Also, the similarities between the writers Mikhail Bakhtin and James Joyce are important for

formulating the study of carnivalization of literature. All three writers incorporate the carnivalesque into their writing by critiquing the existing official, ecclesiastical and feudal cultures.

### CONCLUSION

*Ulysses* is deeply influenced by the carnivalesque culture and grotesque realism. In the free use of parody of epics and other canonical genres, in the use of scatological references and in the glorification of everything that is opposed to the decorum of conventional life, Joyce revived the folk culture in his novel and the novel stands as a literary statement embodying the carnival culture and grotesque realism.

### WORKS CONSULTED

- Alapatt, Nisha Francis. *Polyphony and Fiction: A Reading of James Joyce's Ulysses*. Diss. Mahatma Gandhi U, 2002.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 1929. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.
- . *Rabelais and His World*. 1965. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984
- Budgen, Frank. *James Joyce and the Making of "Ulysses" and other Writings*. 1934; rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Hodgart, Mathew. *James Joyce: A Student's Guide*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London : Routledge, 1990.
- Lodge, David. *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *James Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Kershner, R. B. *Joyce, Bakhtin and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Uof North Carolina P, 1989.
- Rabelais, Francois. *The Uninhibited Adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Trans. And ed. Samuel Putnam. New York: Viking, 1946