



Bakhtinian Carnavalesque in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*

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ABSTRACT

This research is pursued in the light of Bakhtinian carnivalesque paradigm on Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The ultimate goal of this study is to point out carnivalistic elements found in the text and carnivalization of literature. This study shows that carnival spirit has questioned the authorial pretensions and instigated the subversion of socio-political hierarchies graphed by preferred order. Stability of official order is temporarily discouraged by dint of carnival spirit to encourage the commoners. Bakhtinian carnivalesque, in the text, proves to be a silent protest against the recognized cult for the autonomy of the commoners. It liberates the participants from official restraints and exposes the existing play in the institutionalized pattern to challenge its authority. The major shades of Bakhtinian carnivalesque carnival type laughter, role reversal, market-place language and grotesque realism set free the commoners, in the text, from official seriousness. Hugo's text proves to be the sanctuary for the indelible carnival spirit.

Key Words: Bakhtin, Carnavalesque, Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*

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1. Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian trend setter, introduced the notion of carnivalization of literature in his influential text *Rabelais and His World*. He finished this volume in 1940. Bakhtin submitted this book as a dissertation for the degree of the Candidate of Science. At the defense of the dissertation, it was disclosed that the book is a container of insightful notions and Bakhtin deserves a doctoral degree for this contribution in the field of literary criticism. This book was published in Russian language under the title *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* in 1965. The English version of this splendid book was published in 1968 titled as *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin introduced the conception of carnivalesque in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and the notion of carnivalesque in its entirety was developed in *Rabelais and His World*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin has analyzed a French writer Francois Rabelais' work. Even the name Rabelais suggests rebellion. Rabelais wrote in a comic tone. He used grotesque imagery and ambivalent laughter to highlight the politics behind the mask of governing authorities.

Carnival was a common practice for the commoners to abjure the established power structure in past. Its gist can be excavated in medieval period. It was, purely, a public celebration. It was beyond the reach of official order. In the circle of carnival, everyone was free to be anyone. A slave can be transformed into a pontifical master. A beggar can be a mighty king. These transitory transformations liberate the commoners from authorial pretensions. Unmasked official exactness, in carnival, reanimated unofficial order. In the words of Bakhtin, 'extra-political' and 'extra-ecclesiastical' order is developed in carnival by empowering the commoners. That enablement was not materialistic as in modern sense (*Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World*, 1984). It was mental ease from artificial clutches of official culture. It was a transitory liberation from the recognized pattern. The agency of carnival was not only potent but also latent. The official order sensed the possible threat in carnivalesque and bridled it as a 'licensed transgression'. The established order legitimized carnival spirit, by converting it into a public holiday, for wild merrymakings for few days; just to respect the official seriousness. The institutional order circumscribed the carnival spirit to purge the commoners from the instinctive





desire to subvert the authorial truth. In Bakhtinian perception, carnival spirit was indelible and indestructible. Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Francois Rabelais in *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Bakhtin spotted the idea of carnivalization of literature in it. Official monotony rusted it but it found its home in literary castles. The imperishable carnival spirit transferred from carnivals to fiction. Carnival spirit, the gift of past, is de-crowning the crowned by dint of its latent potential in fiction.

Bakhtinian carnivalesque subverts the preferred cult with the aid of ambivalent laughter, role reversal, marketplace language, grotesque realism and duality. In carnival square, the low laugh at the high (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984). Ambivalent laughter is the basic pillar of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. It liberates the participants from official restraints and exposes the existing play in the institutionalized pattern to challenge its authority. Role reversal is equally significant feature of carnivalesque. It allows a beggar to behave like a king, a slave to be a master, female to act like a male and marginal to be central. The commoners, in a carnival, are free to be the one that they are not or they want to be. Grotesque realism is an important element of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Bakhtin sees grotesque realism as the real spirit of unofficial order.

2. Review of Literature

F. Whittington-Walsh (2002), in *From Freaks to Savants: Disability and hegemony from The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) to Sling Blade (1997)* has established that disables experience oppression in our societal set of connections. This subjugation and people's abhorrent attitude is interconnected. Disability of Quasimodo imprisons him in the four walls of cathedral. He is exploited socially, politically, and psychologically. He is alienated socially as well as psychologically. The above-mentioned author's investigation is restricted only to physical disability of Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. She does not make a note of many characters who were politically crippled in the text. Their lives are preoccupied by repressive conventional cult of the day. They are not without charge. Their freedom is disabled by the favored way of life. Oppression experienced in the daily lives of people with disabilities (Whittington-Walsh) snatches their freedom and makes them the slaves of ruling pattern. The author suggests that political disability is more exploitative than physical disability.





Scott Yearsly (2010) has observed the element of sexuality in Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. According to the author, the novel is set in medieval era. Sexual restraints are on their peak. To be expressive sexually is liable to be punished by the official order. The author says that such a manipulative society leans towards tragic end. Social norms are exceedingly authoritative in the text. Characters are bound to cover their inner self. Man is fusion of passion and reason. Equilibrium is mandatory between the two. But in medieval Paris where the novel opens is under the control of church. The order of church is not to be violated. The author says that church makes a prison for the characters, not only for Esmeralda and Quasimodo but also for Claude Frollo. Claude Frollo is ensnared by theological teachings both physically and mentally. He is an archdeacon in the cathedral. He has denounced all worldly pleasures. But the very sight of the seductive beauty of Esmeralda makes Frollo realize that his body is in want of something. The author sees the boundaries of official order in the text but ignores the carnival spirit which allows the characters to put inside out.

Caryl Emerson (2002) in *Coming to Terms with Bakhtin's Carnival: Ancient, Modern, subSpecie Aternitatis* has reviewed the conception of carnivalesque, developed by Bakhtin. The author has explained Bakhtinian carnivalesque with respect to three different schools of thought. After comparing them, he speaks for the validity of Bakhtin's perception of carnival space. The first perception is of Eastern Orthodox Church. The second school of thought linked carnival with evil. Carnival is indifferent to loss and disease in their view (p. 5). The above mentioned author sees that the third group has investigated the perception of carnival in a neutral way. They study carnival as a part of literary evolution. In Emerson's view, Bakhtinian insight is well developed among all stated above. Bakhtin has not only associated carnivalistic activities with wild merrymaking or fun but also with freedom. Carnivalistic festivities empower and embolden the participants. Materialistically, they do not change participants. Emerson asserts, confidently, that activities performed in carnival square change, the participants, physically and mentally. The burden of fear is lessened and clarity is bestowed by wild merrymakings.

3. Thesis Statement

Even a perfunctory look at Hugo's unrivaled text *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, convincingly, creates an impression that it is a quite appropriate candidate for analysis in the light of Bakhtin's





theory of carnivalesque. Political hegemonies have been ridiculed by elements of carnivalesque. Different forms of carnivalesque spotted in the text prove the continuation of agency in the lap of official culture or established order.

4. Research Methodology

The present research is based upon the qualitative analysis of Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in the light of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Carnavalesque is an umbrella term. The current research is confined only to three elements of Bakhtinian carnivalesque which are ambivalent laughter (carnival-type laughter), role reversal and grotesque realism. The present researcher will use the text of Hugo's novel as the primary source of data. The researcher will not only spot out the above-mentioned elements of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in the text but also the impact of these elements on the representatives of both official order and "extra-political" order. Carnival spirit is the gift of time and perhaps it may go on with man till the end of time. Different shades of Bakhtinian carnivalesque are present in Pakistan. Orat March in Pakistan is full of carnival spirit. Power and resistance wrestles in it. Patriarchy is challenged in it.

5. Delimitation

Application of all Bakhtinian theories lies beyond the range of this study. Present study is only restricted to the analysis of Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in the light of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The current study accomplishes to draw attention to the latent agency in carnivalistic celebrations. The main reason behind choosing this topic is the personal interest of the present researcher in the study of relationship between power and resistance.

The current study reinvents the former findings and adds supplementary affirmation which indicates that carnival resistance overturns the recognized cult in Hugo's masterpiece *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The story offers a prolific ground for dissimilar critical lenses. Many mature themes and artistic mastery of Hugo make this novel a key text in French literature. The research work on Hugo's text is voluminous. But none of the researchers has explored this text under the light of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The present study fills that gulf and analyses the role of ambivalent laughter, role reversal and grotesque realism in the above mentioned text.





The Hunchback of Notre-Dame is the gift of French language published in 1831. The title of the French version was *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The English version opted for the current study is penned in 2002. Victor Hugo, the French romanticist, does not approve of the English version of the text as it de-centers the Parisian cathedral with the ill-fated Quasimodo. The English version of the novel highlights and heroizes Quasimodo (Clark, 1996). Quasimodo's poorly assembled body and giant like power catches the attention of the reader. The novel is not an inventive romance packed with impracticable activities (Bendersky, 2006). It hints at the carnivalization of literature that is sensed by Mikhail Bakhtin's in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

6. Data Analysis

The seminal text by Victor Hugo *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is about the superstitious Parisians of the last quarter of 15th century. Gallows were waiting for the possessor of a single printed page. It was a period of socio-political oppression. Official normalcy was in full bloom and carnivalesque too. Hugo had written this text in 1831. In 1831, carnival spirit was legitimized by official order. Legitimization of Bakhtinian carnivalesque by official culture turned it into 'licensed transgression' as mentioned by Terry Eagleton. The indelible carnival spirit was unanimated by official circle. Wild celebrations, disobedient playfulness and merrymakings were permitted under the shade of mitigated carnival spirit. Legalization of carnival force shrank carnivalesque and moved it from real world to fantasy. Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* reanimates carnivalesque in fiction.

Carnival laughter is the basic pillar of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* opens with the commoners laughing at the officials in the Great Hall of the Palace of Justice. In official order, this hall is the epitome of official seriousness. Laughter is a sin and associated with Devil. But 6th of January 1486 is not the day of officials to judge or to announce official decrees in the Great Hall. It is the day of commoners where they are free to be anyone which they are not in reality. This day is the day of The Feast of Fools a major carnival practice in medieval era. Bakhtin has mentioned this feast in *Rabelais and His World* as the guardian of carnival force (p.89). The commoners are to choose the Pope of Fools. They have dressed uniquely. They are not bound to any limit. The Feast of Fools is an event of freedom,





bravery and fun. People are drinking voluptuously. The fools are to choose their Pope. The medieval ages were dominated by theocracy. Pope represents the authority of Church. Church represents power. Pope is mocked by the participants in carnival square by dint of carnival type laughter.

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin opines that the people of medieval period lived in two worlds. One world is of normalcy, soul, beauty, seriousness, fear, rules and boundaries. The second world offers freedom, body, ugliness, playfulness and festivity. The second world is beyond any boundary. It is the reciprocal of official culture. Social ranks are absent in it. The participants are free to do what they want. In this second world of freedom and fun, people are to choose a 'false Pope'. In the official order, the holy shape is adequate for a saintly visage but in unofficial style, the supernatural ugliness is required for the post of the 'false Pope'. The crown of the 'false Pope' is for the ugliest face. Carnival laughter liberates the commoners from official normalcy and frees them from pain and mental anxiety. Although this freedom is transitory, yet it provides the taste of independent living.

The start of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is replete with carnival laughter. To select the 'false Pope' people are to practice abhorrent grimaces not only to produce laughter but also to mock the authority of Pope in the preferred pattern of society. This laughter is the gift of carnivalesque. In official order ruled by laws and boundaries people are not expected even to question Pope but here they are making fun of him openly. This laughter is carnival type laughter as it has sinister energy and it is indifferent to pain or fear of traditional culture. It unmasks the pretensions and artificiality of authority. Caryl Emerson in *Coming to Terms with Bakhtin's Carnival* has suggested three theories of laughter. She tries to satisfy the quench that why we laugh? The author states the view of Plato and Aristotle by saying, we laugh because we feel superior. Carnival is all about laughter and merrymakings. The commoners laugh at the officials in carnival square because they own this feeling of superiority gifted by the 'extra-political' order. Carnival type laughter turns upside down and it empowers the participants to mock the crowned. The second theory which Caryl Emerson has stated is the view of reverend Kant, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer. According to them the author says, We laugh because we are struck by an incongruity. This view about laughter also speaks for the validity of Bakhtinian





carnavalesque laughter. The last theory which is explored about laughter by the above mentioned author is given by Sigmund Freud. This view speaks for laughter as refuge for relief. Bakhtin has notified the same effect in the carnival square that the carnival spirit relieves the commoners from pain and sickness plagued by the official order among the masses. The same effect is sensed in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* when people choose Quasimodo, the unfortunate prototype of imperfection, as the 'false Pope'. The commoners scale down the pontifical attitude by voting for the supernatural unattractiveness of Quasimodo. Quasimodo is, no doubt, ugly but he has monstrous muscles. Physically, he is powerful as well as unattractive. This duality of physical power and repulsiveness make Quasimodo the most suitable candidate for the post of the 'false Pope'. His outward appearance is the inward of Claude Frollo. Claude Frollo is the real representative of the theocratic authority. He has all the qualities of the person of official order. He is serious, well versed and punctual. Quasimodo is quite opposite to Claude Frollo.

Quasimodo is the malformed bell-striker of Notre-Dame cathedral. He is the natural mistake as he is neither a human nor an animal. Quasimodo is something in between the two. The viewers remark him as an 'ugly ape' because of his miraculous uncommonness. He has an unusual head. There is a big hump between his mounted shoulders. He has poorly assembled legs. He is deaf. He is one-eyed monster. The brother of Claude Frollo Jehan is of the view that 'a one-eyed man is more incomplete than the one who is quite blind'. To state the fact in simple terms, the participants of the carnival have to make grimaces to be counted as ugly as required for the 'false Pope' but the whole of Quasimodo is an actual grimace. No need to make it more terrifying. Master Coppenole has chosen many false Popes. But the terrible sight of the ill-fated Quasimodo compels him to state, 'By God! Holy Father! You are the finest piece of ugliness I ever beheld. You deserve to be Pope in Rome as well as in Paris'. People laugh at Quasimodo. They ridicule him. They offer him a crown of disgrace and labeled him as 'an accomplished Pope'. The act of crowning is only to de-crown him later as Bakhtin has stated in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984). Apparently, people are mocking Quasimodo. Actually, they are ridiculing Pope of the established cult utilizing the space provided by the carnival. They are living the unofficial life.





The preferred order is patriarchal. It worships the first part of binary and condemns the second part. Official order is masculine, therefore, womanliness is discouraged. The carnival world speaks for equality. It is open for all. The difference of gender is ignored. So, the participants of the other sex are fearless. They avail of an opportunity in carnival square as Coppenole has suggested in the text opted for current research, 'we have here sufficiently grotesque samples of both sexes so that we can have a hearty laugh'. The social hierarchy which supports male in a patriarchal society is challenged in carnival square. Female sect is free to avail the grotesque opportunities.

Carnivalistic festivities are open to all. Carnival space has no boundaries. It does not have any restrictions. Any laughable can enter in carnival square. It is the asylum to the abjected and dejected of all nations. Equality takes over discrimination. Second life is offered to all to get relief from the rut of official life. Quasimodo is unsocial monster. People have never accepted his humanly existence. In carnival space, people are mysteriously kind enough to celebrate his unusual unattractiveness. An outcast who is always away from social bounds is central in carnivalistic festivity. The inaccessibility between Quasimodo and others is erased by dint of this wild celebration. The prisoner of cathedral is free to live and to enjoy. Before this experience Quasimodo had never experienced the pleasure of self-admiration. His monstrous face was a curse for him that proved to be a blessing in carnival as it leads him to social acceptance. The crux is that nonofficial pattern provides Quasimodo a space to live while preferred cult causes agony.

Victor Hugo has given us pen-portraits of two brothers Claude Frollo and Jehan Frollo. Claude Frollo represents the official order and Jehan stands for the unofficial cult. Claude Frollo the elder brother is dismal, highly serious, pious, and studious as the archdeacon in the Notre-Dame cathedral. Laughter has no place in Claude Frollo's world. He associates laughter with the Devil and regards it as unholy practice. While on the other hand Claude Frollo's younger brother Jehan is non-serious, playful, lazy, mischievous and irregular. He does not respect the official normalcy and live according to human instincts. He is full of carnival spirit. He has sung a song in the text for the current research which shows Bakhtinian carnival force. Jehan sings it as:





I have, by God
No bloody faith,
No laws or vows,
No hearth or house,
No God or king,
Or any such thing. (p. 375)

His song is the voice of carnival. He speaks for no restrictions. No laws, no ranks, no boundaries, no origins, no limitations and no confirmations. Jehan's song is the melodic interpretation Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

The Cour des Miracles is a miraculous place. It is fictionalized representation of Bakhtinian carnival square. No official order is applicable here. The mendicants of the Great Hall of Justice are transformed into potentates of The Cour des Miracles. The Cour des Miracles is the place where greater miracles are performed not by canonized saints but by ordinary people. Here the blind can see. The legless can chase. The Cour des Miracles is refuge to the abjected, rejected and dejected of all colors, creeds and castes. Soberness has no place in it. Chaotic laughter is the sole ruler of this intoxicating space. Anything that is illegal in established order is practicable in it. Roles are reversed here. Laws have been suspended here. Division is demoted and free mixing is promoted.

Pierre Gringoire is from official culture and he is trapped in The Cour des Miracles. His description of The Cour des Miracles is disgusting and derogatory. But he has sensed almost all the characteristics of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in The Cour des Miracles. He witnesses the coarse and chaotic laughter which liberates the people from monotonous bounds of normalcy. He observes the crippled in a race and sees the blind of the day as the spectacle of the night. He has the same view as Gardiner (1992) argues that the 'usual norms' of official order are transgressed in carnival space. Carnival square represents life 'turned inside out'. Pierre sees the mendicants enthroned at casks. Casks are the waste of preferred order but they are utilized as the majestic thrones of the mighty kings in The Cour des Miracles. The kings on the casks have constituted





their laws. No one is superior, no one is inferior. Social ranks are overlooked. All are uniquely equal.

Grotesque realism is the most important element of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Bakhtin has introduced this concept in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and developed it in *Rabelais and His World*. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary grotesque means something that is strange in a way that is unpleasant or offensive or something extremely ugly in a strange way that is frightening. The Italian expression 'grotta' is the root of 'grotesque'. Grotta is associated with the old excavated painting discovered at the end of the 15th century. Those old paintings were the amalgamation of plants, animals and human forms. Those paintings were combined in such a way that looked as a single whole (Kayser, 1996, p.17). The meaning of grotesque is in its ambiguous nature. Lack of clarity makes something grotesque. Ambiguousness is repulsive to the critics; therefore, Rabelais' texts remained unappreciated by the critics.

Bakhtinian carnivalesque is the mixture of the serious and the comic. It can be verbalized as 'sane foolishness. The socially elevated is demoted and the socially subjugated is promoted in carnival space. Grotesque, in Bakhtinian perception, is to free the commoners from inhuman burden of official normalcy. Bakhtinian lens sees the unseen in the grotesque old paintings. He takes the notion of violation of limits in old paintings. Boundaries are broken in grotesque portraits same is brought forth by Bakhtin in carnival. The limits are suspended. Fear of official trend is dissipated. Bakhtin says in *Rabelais and His World* that grotesque cannot be over simplified. Simplified grotesque lost its essence. The quality meaning of grotesque is in its ambiguousness.

The original title of text for current research is *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Our Lady of Paris). It places the cathedral at the center of the text. But the English version of Victor Hugo's novel replaces the cathedral with Quasimodo (the poorly shaped bell-ringer of the cathedral). The literal meaning of Quasimodo is 'half made'. His physical abnormalities satisfy his name. He is deaf. He is one-eyed. He has uneven legs badly assembled. Quasimodo is the perfect specimen of imperfection. Nothing is complete in him. He is incomplete physically, socially and psychologically. This unquestionable incompleteness makes him the most suitable candidate for





Bakhtinian conception of grotesque. Quasimodo's body and Bakhtinian grotesque are parallel to each other. For Bakhtin, grotesque is a form of freedom. Things are allowed to mix to form an ambiguous mixture. No limit is respected. Same is in Quasimodo's case. The soul of an angel is trapped in the body of a monster. Quasimodo's misfortune is that he is neither a man nor an animal. He has a degraded body that is not accepted in the traditional cult but celebrated in nonofficial order.

7. Conclusion / Recommendation

The present research is conducted on *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo using the lens of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. This research was initiated with the assumption that even a perfunctory scan over Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, persuasively, intuitively, that it is a reasonably suitable candidate for study in the light of Bakhtin's perception of carnivalesque. Having done data analysis, the present researcher can humbly and confidently state that the present research proved very successful in analyzing *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in the light of Bakhtin's conception of carnivalesque. This study with reference to the application of Bakhtinian carnivalesque produced far reaching results.

All the significant elements of Bakhtinian carnivalesque have carnivalized Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Ambivalent laughter dissipates the fear of official order in the heart of commoners. It empowers the participants of the Feast of Fools to mock the authorial pretensions. It liberates the participants from official restraints and exposes the existing play in the institutionalized pattern. Role reversal is found not only in the Feast of Fools but also in "The Cour des Miracles". Slaves mock the masters. Beggars pretend to be mighty lords. Disobedient sort of playfulness unmask 'pretensions to authority' and allows the free mixing of people irrespective to their social rank. Grotesque liberates the commoners by dint of degradation in the selected text for the present study. Quasimodo's physique is synonymous to Bakhtinian perception of grotesque as he is the perfect example of imperfection.

The present study is confined only to three shades of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Carnivalistic laughter, role reversal and grotesque realism are marked by the current researcher. It is noted that a fresh research can be conducted on the text opted for the present research about





the role of market-place language. Market-place language is another element of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Moreover, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection can also be utilized to study the character of Quasimodo. Quasimodo is the unfortunate bell-ringer of Notre-Dame Cathedral. No one likes him because of his ill-shaped body. He is living in abject misery. Quasimodo's poorly shaped body can be viewed in the light of Kristeva's conception of abject.

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