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Analysis Of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnavalesque In The Light Of R.K Laxman's Cartoons

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to examine the critical ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque in the light of R.K Laxman's political cartoons. Laxman's cartoons significantly throw light on the major aspects of Carnavalesque theory. However, this paper addresses Bakhtin's main ideas such as laughter, grotesque realism, language, and eccentric behavior through Laxman's cartoons. Moreover, Laxman's political cartoons are built on the aesthetic grounds of the central aspects of Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque theory, and they resemble aspects of Carnavalesque theory. In fact, the theory of Carnavalesque and political cartoons are two different genres, but still the bottom roots of Laxman's political cartoons explicitly cling to the bottom roots of Carnavalesque theory. His cartoons are tied up with the central subjects of Carnavalesque theory. We must recognize the truth that Mikhail Bakhtin and R.K Laxman dig out the grimmer realities of society through their works. Moreover, they both used laughter and grotesqueness as a tool to create the comic atmosphere, and to exhibit the reality behind the scenes.

Keywords: Carnavalesque, Political cartoons, R.K Laxman, Laughter, Mikhail Bakhtin.

Introduction:

Every cartoonist uses a distinct phenomenon to show their creativity; frequently, they will use their inner vision to paint a picture of a social gathering or a natural uproar, which may be interpreted in either a positive or negative way. Artists are free to judge society since they are intellectual property of human society, and they can also critique society through important aspects of their work. Every day we find cartoons in newspapers, magazines and on the television. Most of the time, people ignore them, and simultaneously consider them as not useful at all. However, when we keenly look at the cartoons, they contribute a vivid picture of everyday life, and they capture every aspect of society. Political cartoons are an important part of any newspaper, and though the position

of this piece is small, the impact is huge. It conveys a lot of information in few words. Even if the emotions behind them were harsh, it would often take with a sense of humour.

Cartoons are a type of framed visual satire presentation that are widely used in newspapers today. It tackles contemporary public issues, personalities, events, political or social or economic or cultural trends with the perfect blend of humor, wit, and satire. Comics are a form of visual expression where writers explain words, pictures, and other visual elements to communicate their ideas. Here, comics often place a series of visual images alongside textual devices such as speech and thought, captions, and figurative expressions to carry out their narration.

The modern political cartoon entered the Indian scenario during the British raj. Britain is illustrated comic-satiric periodicals like *Punch* (1841-1992), *Fun* (1861-1901), and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1865-1921) greatly boosted the birth of the genre of cartooning and satire in India. Though political cartooning was a gift of western culture to India, over the years, it has developed its own independent style become huge popular among the readers of newspaper and magazines.

R.K Laxman:

R.K Laxman is an Indian cartoonist and an illustrator. He is best known for his creation the common man. He is a legendary cartoonist not because of the paper he is associated with, but because of the cartoons he put on it. His cartoons were effective yet less controversial. R K Laxman, being a social cartoonist, makes a commentary upon the lives of millions of Indians who live in challenging times politically, socially, and economically. Laxman's readers found him to be realistic, but a casual reader may see it as slapstick. His sketches had an extraordinary ability of capturing the interest of the readers. With his sketches, adults started loving cartoons and so many youngsters started taking a keen interest in the politics of India.

Theory of Carnavalesque:

The concept of Carnavalesque is proposed by a Russian critic, Bakhtin. The essence of Carnavalesque sets free beliefs of the higher class through humor and chaos. In other words, the nature of Carnavalesque mocks the behavior of those higher in authority and presents them as everyday fools, whereas in reality they are regarded as far more intelligent than others. Moreover, Carnavalesque is primarily a study of laughter. The laughter plays a significant role in Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin attempts to account for the ways in which the meaning of laughter, and the culture with which it is associated, have been transformed since the Renaissance. Bakhtin argues that in the work of Rabelais, and in the popular carnival forms which informed it, laughter enjoyed a positive corporeal and collective significance. The *Rabelais and His World*, considered and identified as 'the summit in the history of laughter' (1984:10). Bakhtin is grounded on the premise that Rabelais' texts are indebted to the culture of folk carnival humour, and he uses the term 'Carnavalesque' to refer not only to carnival in its narrow sense; the specific festivals and feast days celebrated over the course of the year, but also to the whole range of popular and festive practices that developed during the Middle Ages. Bakhtin says:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness (1984: 66)

R.K Laxman addresses Bakhtin's idea of laughter in a significant manner through his cartoons. In fact, the subject of laughter is one of the prevalent subjects in Laxman cartoons. The primary concerns of his cartoons are to represent the idea of laughter, and simultaneously ridicule the behavior of people in society. His cartoons exhibit the social, economic, and political outlook of society. He used cartoons as powerful weapons to create

the idea of laughter, and through his cartoons Laxman exposed the outlook of the world.



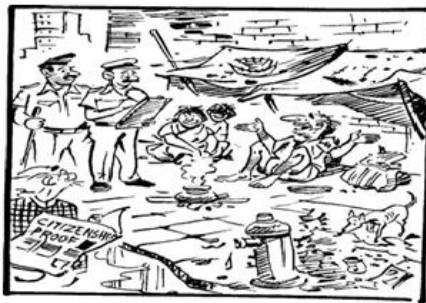
When we read the above cartoon by Laxman, it brings out the idea of laughter and creates the comic atmosphere, and simultaneously, it exposes the reality of society; how people use public places as toilets. In Bakhtin's Carnavalesque, Laughter became a social commentary, and it became a resource to understand the layers of society. In fact, Laxman clearly depicts the resembling notion of Bakhtin. Here Laxman represented the idea of Carnavalesque in the realm of joke. The above cartoon became an important source to understand the layers of society.

The language plays a significant role in Carnavalesque. As a philosopher and literary scholar, Bakhtin had a language obsession. We might also say a perfect understanding of language. He points out the fact that we are actually dealing with someone else's word more often than our own. According to Bakhtin, a carnival "offers the chance to enter a completely new order of things, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to have a new outlook on the world." (1965:34). Bakhtin takes Carnival as a second life of the people who behave subversively, speak 'Carnivalized' language and makes carnival laughter on the Carnival square where Carnival acts are performed. One has to realize the truth that the greatness of Carnavalesque lies in the use of language. As Michael Bristol said:

Central to the experience of Carnival is a particular use of language, symbols, costumes and masks in which the ordinary relationship between signifier and signified is disrupted and conventional meaning of parodied (Bristol 1983:641)

In political cartoons, the language, humour, and symbols play a significant role. The language is one of the main aspects of political cartoons. The diversity of language in a cartoon has significant influence on how effective it is. Through their witty language, the absurdity, hypocrisy is exposed, and it makes the reader laugh at those who are in power. The aspect of laughter and humor serves as a sweet coating upon the sour pill.

The use of political language often points out the contradictions in politics in a wry way. The language is often used in the text with irony; this sort of language is often seen in political cartoons. Sometimes it is amusing and other times it can be very resentful. Cartoons are insightful and demonstrate societal imperfections through irony. Language is often used in text with irony, in order to convey the idea of laughter and the inner reality; this sort of ironical language is often seen in political cartoons of Laxman.



What, are we citizens of India? Of course, we are! Don't we look it?

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The above cartoon by Laxman explicitly consists of the ironical language, and it throws light on the poverty of India. The ironical language in the picture explicitly demonstrates the idea that one cannot imagine India without poverty, and in fact, poverty is considered as one of the major proof of the Indian citizens. Obviously, the language they use in the copycatting culture programs is spoken in a way in which the normal language rules are vibrated by challenging the general laws of language. They recombine the words with different dialects mixed together. Overall, the language in the copycatting culture programs becomes Carnivalized, just like what is described in Rabelais and His World by Bakhtin (1984: 420). The Carnivalized language helps to express the carnival sense of the world, because language is power, language constructs identity and ethnicity. As a consequence, language helps to construct ideology.

Along with the concept of Laughter, Bakhtin significantly describes Grotesque Realism. In fact, grotesque realism is one of the important aspects in Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque. It is widely believed that the concept of Grotesque realism became famous with the work of Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World. The concept of grotesque realism is put forward by Bakhtin in his study of Francois Rabelais and His World. The physical functions with which grotesque imagery is preoccupied are all dynamic processes of interaction between the body and the world, and between the old and the new. Grotesque is a kind of artistic imagery, based on a comic, caricature, burlesque and quirky effect. Grotesque is defined as a notable deviation from the accepted or acknowledged regulation forms. "Degradation and the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, and ideal of material level are the fundamental principles of grotesque realism." (21).

The carnivalesque is a metaphor for another reality that exists outside of the typical hierarchical world and provides alternatives. It also symbolizes change, a process of emancipation, destruction, and renewal. Additionally, Bakhtin highlighted its "grotesque realism" and connection to the untamed "lower body". Through the use of grotesque bodies in his work, Rabelais related political conflicts to human anatomy. According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism "the bodily element is deeply positive, it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world"(19). Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excess, and excision are the primary indicators of the grotesque style.

In grotesque realism, the body plays a pivotal role. Grotesque imagery also had an important connection with laughter; however, laughter played a central role in the Carnavalesque cultural practices of the middle Ages. Grotesque realism enlarges a peculiar shape and appearance of the body. The ultimate aim of grotesque realism is to project the great personalities in a peculiar and comic manner. Laxman's Cartoons also follow the resembling path of Bakhtin's concept of Grotesque Realism, where the human body is degraded by adding a peculiar

appearance. Political cartoons are significantly focused on the concept of Grotesque realism. In fact, Grotesque Realism is the heart of the political cartoons.

R.K Laxman gave life to his political cartoons by adding Grotesque Realism. Exaggeration and distortion are the primary tools employed by a cartoonist who shows someone's power or weakness, the importance or the insignificance, and dangerousness or helplessness of a person, group, or social force. In other words, distortion and exaggeration help to emphasis extremes in personalities or actions. The depiction of peculiar looks in some way demonstrates the idea of grotesque realism. R.K Laxman created a space for Carnavalesque within the framework of political Cartoons. The so called political leaders showed in a comic way to represent the idea of grotesque realism. Bharat Jagtap the Cartoonist from Maharashtra says:

Caricatures are impressions of your face they are not portraits. As such their finished work is an interpretation of the image/s supplied and can include exaggerations and other interpretive manipulations. Caricature a representation, in which the subject's distinctive features or peculiarities are deliberately exaggerated to produce a comic or grotesque effect. This means a caricature is not a portrait, and under some circumstances may have a limited similarity to the original subject. Basically it means your nose may not be proportional because it has been exaggerated, or a forehead might be extra high etc. Certain elements of the face or body may adopt different shapes – this is what caricaturing is all about. (Bharat Jagtap: Interview 2009)

Along with the concept of grotesque realism, Bakhtin also offers four categories of what he calls the "carnivalistic sense of the world". In the carnivalistic sense of the world, Bakhtin primarily throws the light on eccentric Behaviour. Bakhtin's main idea in eccentric behaviour is to reveal the concealed sides of the human being. We can find Bakhtin's idea of eccentric behaviour in Laxman's Political cartoons. Usually, the Cartoonists most of the time exhibit the disguised behaviors of the people through his cartoons. In fact, Cartoons brings the subject of inner self in a kind of physiognomic satire. The eccentric behaviour creates the platform for revealing the hidden truths of the people.



*We are going off to ask people to vote for unity, stability, solidarity.
Coming?*



Tell them about the Gandhian ideals of unity, service and selfless devotion to the party. All of them are rebels and dissidents.

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The above cartoons clearly demonstrate the idea of eccentric behavior of the political leaders in the significant manner. In reality, they don't follow any principles and ethical values, but when it comes to public life, they teach the morals to the people. In front of the society they wear the mask of goodness, and pretend themselves as they love other.

Bakhtin notes that Carnival is not confined to any particular time and space. In addition, it did not only exist just in the public sphere and in the town square. However, they embodied and symbolized the Carnavalesque idea of being universal and belonging to all people. In the case of political cartoons also, they do not confine to any particular time and space, simultaneously the subject of political cartoons doesn't only confine to politics, but it also concerned about many issues of the society, and the political cartoons exemplify the idea of Carnavalesque idea in the universal level.

According to Bakhtin in "Carnival and Carnavalesque", comprehending this dichotomy is essential for understanding medieval culture. This duality is the key to the understanding of medieval culture consciously. A carnival is a platform where everything is permitted. Carnavalesque imagery is always dualistic and equivocal in Bakhtin's view. The carnival unites the two poles of change and crisis, birth and death, down and up, wisdom and stupidity etc. On the other hand, there were the Carnavalesque life which was free and unbounded, filled with ambivalent laughter, sacrilegious and the defilement of anything sacred, and humiliations and familiar contact with everyone and everything. It creates a new chance for new perceptive and a new order of things by showing the relative nature of all that exist.

According to Laxman also, understanding the cartoons are equals to understanding the current scenario of the world. As I mentioned, Carnival is a platform where everything is permitted. We have to acknowledge the truth that in the case of political cartoons also everything is permitted. They tackle the issues of the good and bad, birth and death, down and up, wisdom and stupidity etc. Bakhtin portrays carnival as an expression of second life of the people against their substitution in the dominant ideology. It brings togetherness among unknown people. Carnival brings the gap between holism and refuse authority. Like Bakhtin's theory of carnavalesque, Laxman's political Cartoons also celebrate the idea of laughter in the significant manner, and they fill the gap between the social hierarchies.

Conclusion:

Carnival succeeded in understanding the feudal world view and it created a new spirit. Bakhtin believed that the carnival principles are the inspiration for areas of life and culture. Carnival and Carnavalesque disputed and mocked the 'normal rules' of order and morality. The Carnavalesque represents a separate reality, which independent of the ordinary hierarchical world, which offers alternatives to it and brings change, a process of liberation, destruction and renewal. Bakhtin emphasized the characteristic of ambivalence. The idea of ambivalence combines the praise and abuse. And it gives the space for discussing good and bad. The cartoons also, don't only confine to the subject of pessimistic ideas, but they also create a space for analysing optimistic things.

Eventually, we notice that R.K Laxman's cartoons are faithful record and a transcription of Carnavalesque aspects. Thus, it can be concluded that Laxman's political cartoons illustrates the aspects of Carnavalesque successfully. Moreover, a close reading of Laxman's cartoons reveals the major insights of Bakhtin's theory of Carnavalesque. It can be understood from this paper that Laxman established Bakhtin's main ideas such as laughter, grotesque realism, language, and the eccentric behaviour in a significant manner through his cartoons.

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