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## The Carnavalesque in *The Tempest* and *The Room on the Roof*

Dr. Arup Pal

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Asutosh College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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### Abstract

This essay examines Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque as a subversive, regenerative force in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1623) and Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* (1956). Far from mere festive spectacle, Bakhtinian carnival temporarily withholds hierarchical order, commemorates grotesque realism, and asserts renewal through degradation, laughter, and bodily excess. In *The Tempest*, the storm, Caliban's grotesque rebellion, the mock-kingdom of Stephano-Trinculo-Caliban, and Prospero's final plea for release effectuate crowning/de-crowning, leveling master and slave, and critiquing civilized authority. Likewise, in Ruskin Bond's semi-autobiographical text, Rusty's participation in Holi, his physical assault on his guardian Mr. Harrison, and his immersion in the Indian bazaar and *chaat*-shop camaraderie overturn colonial hierarchies and Anglo-Indian propriety, transforming the adolescent protagonist through carnivalesque autonomy. Both texts, separated by centuries and cultures, reveal carnival as a universal spirit of renewal that challenges officialdom, embraces the incomplete body, and affirms life's regenerative potential.

**Keywords:** Carnavalesque, Bakhtin, grotesque realism, hierarchical subversion, renewal.

Bakhtin's notion of carnival differs from the popular notion of the same term. Traditionally, carnival refers to the extravagant celebration and amusement party observed in the Roman Catholic countries before *Lent*, a ritual during which 'fleshly' association is restricted. To be more precise, carnival, which is supposed to have been brought from Latin *carne* *levare* or *carnelevarium*, meaning 'to put away flesh', is the final occasion on which "meat was permissible before Easter" (Cuddon 111) and from which fasting and asceticism for forty days begin. Though its origin is hard to locate, carnival is a "season of revels, of merrymaking, feasting and entertainments (e.g. a Spanish fiesta)" (111). The term came into prominence in academia with the release of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's critically acclaimed book *Rabelais and His World* in 1965. In carnival, social hierarchies are challenged and replaced by incompliance, indeterminacy and equality for a temporary period of time. Yet, we must not forget that carnival, as a historical phenomenon, too observed "the disruption and subversion of authority; a turning upside down of the hierarchical scale . . ." (111). Bakhtin truly felt the potentially

of public carnival and employed its spirit into literature, e.g., in Rabelais's novels. The Soviet philosopher points out that 'carnavalesque' – the spirit of carnival rendered in literature – has been occurring from the ancient time through the Renaissance to the Modern Age. Carnival reinforces alternatives by abolishing codes and conducts; it liberates human spirit, ridicules officialdom, and celebrates bodily excess by providing genuine laughter and all that is incomplete:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (*Rabelais and His World* 10)

Bakhtin felt the potentiality of public carnival and employed its spirit of free thinking while assessing literary works. In a way, he directed this popular carnival spirit to literary tendency. Carnival – a "means for displaying otherness" – makes 'familiar relation strange' (Holquist 89), and offers a whole new worldview – an alternate life – a way of looking deep into life – wherein we can put trivialities and grandeur, tears and smile, rightness and error on equal sphere: "[t]he carnival inversions, the world-turned-upside-down of these festivities, were clearly not aimed at loosening people's sense of the rightness of the rules which kept the world the right way up, but on the contrary at reinforcing them" (Dentith 72).

In all the great Renaissance writings, Bakhtin believes, the true carnival spirit is well perceived. While evaluating Rabelais's novels, he finds that Shakespeare's plays finely exemplify a number of outward carnivalesque elements through "the images of the material bodily lower stratum, of ambivalent obscenities, and of popular banquet scenes" (*RW* 275). However, Bakhtin does not forget to add:

This does not merely concern the secondary, clownish motives of his plays. The logic of crownings and uncrownings, in direct or in indirect form, organizes the serious elements also. And first of all this 'belief in the possibility of a complete exit from the present order of this life' determines Shakespeare's fearless, sober (yet not cynical) realism and absence of dogmatism. This pathos of radical changes and renewals is the essence of Shakespeare's world consciousness. It made him see the great epoch-making changes taking place around him and yet recognize their limitations. (*RW* 275)

Mature Shakespeare in his final stage could realize the grandeur of this alternative – the 'secondary' life – life out of order, integrity, completion, which in turn makes living broader, wholesome, "free and unrestricted" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 129), and in which people actively participate. His experimentalist mind could find ample scope in popular folk elements – among them carnival stands vivacious. In Ruskin Bond's territory, however, carnivalesque in his debut novel *The Room on the Roof* (1956) comes out as a direct outburst of the semi-autobiographical protagonist's anxiety and development. Whereas Shakespeare employs carnivalesque aspects in his last and complete theatrical venture *The Tempest* (1623) in the Renaissance, Bond does so in his first aspiring story of development in the middle of the Twentieth century. Both of them, nevertheless, leave the reader in complete understanding that carnival is omnipresence and the very life-spirit of humanity.

In *The Tempest*, the main opposition lies between Prospero's Art and Caliban's raw Nature: 'Caliban is the natural man against whom the cultivated man is measured' (Kermode xxiv). An ideal and unambiguous contrast between natural vileness and supremacy of Art is presented through the binary of Caliban and Miranda. Miranda is sobered and sophisticated by Art; she is the fruit of Nurture. Contrarily, Caliban's brutality is exposed through his lust, physical assault and hideous figure, which remain uncured even by Prospero's White magic. Related to the opposition between Nature and Art is the theme of restraint and control which only the civility can afford. While the true representatives of

the civility, Ferdinand and Miranda are capable of controlling their emotional and erotic desires, Caliban's unimproved nature fails. Caliban's promiscuity, from the angle of theatrical performance, brings laughter nonetheless. His assertion of violating Miranda's virginity, his sense of humour and mockery, his sexually bent of mind, and his wicked delight in profaning both Prospero's royalty and Miranda's purity define Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism' which is one the central achievements of carnivalesque. If Caliban is not mended by Nurture, Rusty too remains unnerved by Westernized education and upbringing. Rusty's taking pleasure to venture into the Indian bazaar against the insistent order of his guardian, sharing emotions among Indian friends, or his *adda* 'chaat' shop unsettles the class, culture, and taste he belongs to.

Since Carnival celebrates the victory of the physical body or grotesque realism, character portrayal is quite pertinent in this context: Caliban, an anagram for 'cannibal', appears as an ill-smelled "debosh'd fish", "half a fish and half a monster" (3.2.25, 28) and four-legged monster to Trinculo and Stephano in *The Tempest*. For Prospero, he is a "beast" (4.1.140), "mis-shapen knave" (5.1.268), 'demi-devil bastard', and a product of sexual union between a witch and an incubus. Prospero adds that this results his deformity (5.1.272-73). Caliban's birth unveils that he is a son of Sycorax, a witch which is generally conceived as somewhat awful, ill-shaped creature. Moreover, Caliban is the 'abhorred' (1.1.353) slave to Miranda and Prospero, whose meanness aided with his physical deformity makes Miranda averse to him. His ill-mouth can throw words even to his master (if he ever receives Prospero as his master): "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brush'd/ With raven's feather from unwholesome fen/ Drop on you both! A south-est blow on ye/ Abd blister you all o'er!" (1.2.323-26). In return he has to endure Prospero's malignancy:

For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,  
Side-stiches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins  
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,  
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinch'd  
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging  
Than bees that made'em. (1.2.327-32)

The boatswain, in Antonio's eyes, is 'wide-mouthed rascal' (1.1.56) for whom they are going to be drowned. Similar celebration of the body is noticed in *The Room on the Roof*. With "torn pyjamas" (27), and "tousled and streaked" (26) hair messed with multi-coloured 'abir', Rusty's body demonstrates "a patchwork of paint" (27) like an active participant of carnivalesque. Rusty's Western training and English education collapses before this Indian colour-game. Furthermore it makes him "wild, ragged, ungrateful wretch" (27) by deluding the fundamental discrimination between proper and improper, civilized and barbaric and decent and shameful. Rusty's English decency is completely up-sides-down with the "filth" (28) he brought in. This intermingleness questions, in Mr. Harrison's words, Rusty's belongingness: "How can you call yourself an Englishman, how can you come back to this house in such condition?" (28). Mr. Harrison's utter bafflement, "You look like a mongrel that you are!" (28), is to consume Rusty's retort: "I'm no better than the sweeper boy, but I' as good and him! I'm as good as you! I'm as good as anyone!" (29), which brings Mr. Harrison's authorial position down to the common plight in which he placed Rusty a little earlier. Carnival act of leveling is beautifully performed here through this confrontation as well.

For Bakhtin, carnival does not offer a mere "spectacle" but shares a "universal spirit" (RW 7), in which the entire world lives and actively takes part to get revived and renewed:

Carnival . . . embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (RW 7)

By participating into Holi – Indian Spring carnival, in which people from varied cultures and races actively take part and sense the newness of life – Rusty not only cherishes its very spirit of rejuvenation to the fullest but also overturns the uncrossed barrier of his guardian's monolithic worldview. *Bandyopadhyay* rightly points out in the same gesture: "The spring carnival is instrumental in leveling the master/slave distinction by upending the boy's sense of affiliation" (35). In fact, *The Room on the Roof* begins with seasonal rebirth which brings forth freshness to its characters. It is in such reviving aura, Somi's usual friendliness amply comes out towards a shy Anglo-Indian teenager, Rusty. Holi celebration makes Rusty 'one of the Indian boys' (25) who in English colonial view belong to the lower class, specifically, servant class. Ranbir and Rusty befriend and share mutual sympathy. Bond writes, "The infection of spring spread simultaneously through the world of man and the world of nature, and made them one" (24). If Holi could make its participants forget their daily hardships and poverty, it is in the same occasion Rusty could forget "his guardian and the missionary's wife and the supple malacca cane . . ." (26) and feel "another world" in which "the pain of his body became a pleasure . . ." (27).

In *The Tempest*, Ariel's obedience to Prospero and his commitment to the assigned works may put the spirit as Prospero's second slave, but a deeper insight will reveal that Ariel's commitment mostly comes from its indebtedness to Prospero who freed it from Sycorax's afflicting custody. Whereas Caliban, in direct contrast, contests Prospero's order, Ariel through his music and mischievous playfulness accentuate the very idea of renewal. His witty mischief directed to evil-doers, his relish in enacting tricks upon Alonso and his party, his successful endeavour to dethrone the gambit made by Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano, his delight in tormenting the misshapen master Caliban – all these speak volume for Carnival idea of revival and renewal. Ariel stands for universal freedom and its omnipresence. His easy-delight even while performing tasks depicts a sense of happiness.

Carnival did exist in Medieval times; there laughter frees people "completely from all religious and ecclesiastic Dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. . . . Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church's cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere." (RW 7)

*The Tempest* begins with suspension of order; first, climate is manpowered, and secondly the ship is turned over. Stritmatter and Kositsky have made a valid argument in this context by arguing that the ship, which symbolized both church and state in medieval iconography, is dismantled here under carnival spirit (64). Again, Boatswain's order to Antonio and Gonzalo to leave the deck and stay in cabins appears as if they are illicitly interfering the boatswain's reign. Moreover, his verbal aggressiveness, situational supremacy, and bringing the king down to the mere stature of a common man viv-a-vis the storm through ironical questioning "What care these roarers/for the name of King?" (1. 1. 16-17) ridicule the status quo of the monarch and his men. All their prayer, respect, and decorum to pacify the outraged nature are gone astray. And the audience is entertained with their ritualistic presentation:

This carnival of the elements, orchestrated by Prospero just as real storms were believed to be inflicted by God, precipitates Lenten penitence in the passengers: 'the king and prince [are] at prayers. Let's assist them, for our case is as theirs' (1.1. 46-47). Penitence, and with its forgiveness, becomes a leitmotif of the play, culminating in Prospero's final appeal to the audience: 'As you from crimes to pardon'd be/ Let your indulgence set me free' (epi. 19-20)." (Stritmatter and Kositsky 65)

In 'carnivalistic' world, Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)" (123). The boatswain's constant retorts against the royal position and prestige invariably put him on the performing sovereignty in this carnival world. Standing before the imminent

death the king (the master) would not get any additional advantage than the boatswain (the servant). On stage, where carnival is enacted, both of them thus are equal.

Against the rightful Duke of Milan posits savage Caliban; against Prospero's disciplined and tempered Art situates Caliban's raw nature; against self-restrained and White magic locates Sycorax's untrimmed Black one and Caliban's uncontrolled exuberance; and against Prospero's propriety stands Caliban's incompleteness. Prospero's civility is questioned by Caliban's uncivil appetites. Above all, Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero as the representative of an ordered society is subverted by the break-free delineation of Caliban. Caliban's savagery, grotesque physically, and bellow-the-belt behavior aided by his unbound disobedience, in fact, are meant to be set against the hierarchical sovereignty which Prospero enacts as a role-player of the island. Master-servant relationship is subverted again when Trinculo and Stephano, despite being the servants of Alonso, decide to reign the island at Caliban's proposal, forgetting their real stature. In "all-annihilating and all-renewing" carnival aura of 'crowning-decrowning' Caliban or Stephano's hope to reign the island defines "the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 124). Bakhtin adds: "Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival" (124). The epilogue gifts us a different Prospero: *The Tempest* ends with Prospero's words directed to the audience, asking for his release from the confinement in the marooned island. This may have double significance: first, once the performance is over, Prospero has done his role and asked for release. Secondly, Prospero asks the audience for permission so that he can participate in bigger carnival (if we try to consider his act of raising storm as an attempt to unsettle the sustaining order for a certain period of time) outside the stage – i.e., life itself.

A direct instance of hierarchical subversion, leveling, and degradation occurs when Rusty, enraged at Mr. Harrison's inhuman treatment, pays him back: "Rusty gripped him by the collar and pushed him backwards, until they both fell over on to the floor . . . the boy slapped his guardian's face" (*The Room* 29). He is not a boy now, with renewed Nature, Rusty has become revived himself; from boyhood he has emerged into manhood. Spring has brought the change:

Mad with the pain in his own face, Rusty hit the man again and again, wildly and awkwardly, but the giddy thrill of knowing he could do it: he was a child no longer, he was nearly seventeen, he was a man. He could inflict pain, that was a wonderful discovery; there was a power in his body – a devil or a god – and he gained confidence in his power; and he was a man!" (29)

Rusty's slap can be seen as a peripheral supremacy over Mr. Harrison's centralized and strict missionary ritual; Again, Rusty's revelry in Indian 'tikkees' at the 'chaat' shop and denial for cold lemonade offered by the missionary wife dismantle the order and precipitates the free play. His slow but steady assimilation into Indian life severely contests the British attitudes Mr. Harrison holds. If this is one side, then Somi and Ranbir's move against Mr. Harrison's wish to take Rusty among their Indian circle is another victory. Rusty's leave from his guardian's house was fired by rebellious zeal, which directs him into a sort of real-life adventure for gathering experience.

The caroling among Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano in *The Tempest* and the carefree 'adda' among Rusty, Somi, and Ranbir at the 'chaat' shop can be seen in light of carnivalesque. In Act 1, Scene 2, we notice that Caliban, after assuming drunk Trinculo to be one of Prospero's spirits, veils himself under his own cloak. While Trinculo, having been terrified of some claps of thunder, conceals himself under Caliban's cloak. Stephano, quite drunk, appears in the middle and notices some four-legged monster (Caliban) suffering. To give him relief, Stephano considers wine to be the best remedy. Unable to recognize the source of Trinculo's voice, Stephano is amazed at Caliban's dual voices: "Four legs and two voices, – a most delicate mon-/ster! His forward voice, now, is to speak well of his/ friend; his

backward voice is to utter foul speeches/ and to detract. . ." (2.2.91-94). Meanwhile, Caliban, considering them 'gods' and the wine as "celestial liquor" (2.2.118), wants to be their servant in order to make them his stool to avenge against Prospero and to let himself free from enslavement. The trio's plotting against Prospero and intentions to become the king and viceroys of the island not only seem ridiculous but also cause the "temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time" (RW 10). During his daughter's marriage ceremony Prospero is somewhat disturbed and challenged by the "foul conspiracy" (4.1.139) of Caliban and his mates. In fact, their act of swearing holding a bottle of wine, or Stephano's madness after over-dose, or Caliban's act of taking oath by the name of his "mistress" (2.2.141) reflects the sense of carefree laughter and mockery against all that is sacred, noble and pure. Again, by alluding Miranda as his 'mistress' and setting her as Stephano's (Alonso's servant) bed-partner, Caliban not only de-establishes the hierarchical pattern but also brings Miranda down to a baser level:

Profanities and oaths (*jurons*) are in many ways similar to abusive language. They too invaded billingsgate speech. Profanities must also be considered a special genre with the same attributes as abuse-isolation from context and intrinsic character. Profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace. Here in the carnival atmosphere they acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent. (RW 17)

The three servants' ploy, like Rusty, Somi and Ranbir's unuttered challenge against Mr. Harrison's English attitude and strict residue, of assassinating Prospero and of Stephano's sovereignty to be the monarch of the island subverts the ordered ritual of royal ancestry. "Rusty's almost passive submission", *Bandyopadhyay* aptly puts, "to Somi's wishes since the laughter" (33) brings forth the same kind of carnivalized comfort. Again Indian 'tikkees' at the 'chaat' shop, for instance, contests the missionary wife's cold lemonade. The royal and the savage mingle – of course, in transitory caroling – reinforcing the atmosphere of carnivalization.

Throughout the episodes of *The Room* and *The Tempest*, officialdom is challenged and mocked quite a number of times. Both Rusty in *The Room* and Caliban in *The Tempest* mock the sustaining authorities by their actions. Either in Rusty's direct assault or in Caliban's humiliating moves, degradation to their masters is exerted. By visiting the Indian bazaar against his guardian's will, against the taught Western conduct, Rusty violates obeisance and by engaging himself into the Indian colour game (which blurs the distinction between higher and lower, the king and the slave, the rich and the poor, as all of them are covered with patches of variegated colours) Rusty none but disgraces Mr. Harrison's elitist British prestige and snobbery. Rusty's slap may come as a direct reaction of Mr. Harrison's inhuman treatment, but it disgraces his guardianship. However, Mr. Harrison's calling Rusty as a 'mongrel' – a disrespectful term indicating his half Indian-half British stature – is a sudden outcome of surprised M. Harrison against his brat. In later episodes, Rusty calls himself 'mongrel' so as to ridicule Mr. Harrison's inability to realize the poignancy of the former's state of being.

Caliban's verbal abuse and parody against Prospero mainly comes from the sense of deprivation of his legal property: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse" (1.2.365-66). And, in addition, he is penalized as a servant. Victimized Caliban's every action thus is meant to disgrace the usurper Prospero. His attempt to humiliate Miranda, Prospero's virgin daughter, therefore can be seen as a direct attempt to demean Prospero's unlawful (from Caliban's point of view) reign. Since "verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used" (RW 16) in carnival, Caliban's expression is justified: "O ho, O ho! Would't had been done!/ Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (1.2.351-53). Degradation, which is enacted by 'grotesque realism', is itself an affirmation for regeneration and renewal. This apparent dichotomy, according to Bakhtin, is one of the central attitudes of Renaissance culture:

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (RW 21)

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