

# Dialogism in Practice: Exploring the Carnavalesque in the Selected Assamese Novels of Arupa Patangiya Kalita

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## Abstract

Bakhtinian concept of Dialogism encircles the idea that every member in a society gets connected to one another through dialogues where they interact and express their thoughts, feelings and opinions which are actually some renditions of the existing body of ideas in the social order. One's personality and consciousness gets reflected through his/her interaction with the outer world and relationship with the members of the society; thus all social human beings live lives of "buzzing, overlapping, endlessly ramifying simultaneity" in the words of the Bakhtinian critic Michael Holoquist. Among the different ways of execution of the dialogic interpretation of things, carnivalesque is one which is a spectacle lived upon by the people in a society rather than observed. Carnavalesque takes us to such a lived ambience where each participant gets a chance to echo his/her voices and be heard without any hierarchical differences among them. Carnivalistic scenario in a social order allows the underrated and non-celebrated elements to get glorified and evoked with equal degree of significance; thus making possible the representation of all the facets of a society, be it normal or abnormal, poor or rich, real or unreal, king or the clown, men or women and so on which is most extensively portrayed in the novelistic genre. This paper attempts to study a selected number of Assamese novels so as to figure out how carnivalesque operates in these narratives; the texts selected for the purpose is *Felanee* and *Jashnar Jhitas* by Arupa Patangiya Kalita, one of the contemporary significant new age novelists in Assam.

**Keywords:** Body; Carnavalesque; Dialogism; Glorification of the underrated; Grotesque; Hierarchy; Multivoicedness.

## **Introduction**

Novels are extended long narratives in literature mostly written in prose style, though not restricted to it. As D.H Lawrence has opined in his essay "Why the Novel Matters?" that novels are the 'bright book of life', this genre of literature has been reflecting diverse shades of human life in different socio-cultural landscapes right from its coming into existence making the world community experience life in its different colors. However, the growth of novelistic genre differs from one literary body to another in different countries. Assamese literary fraternity eye witnessed the appearance of novel writing as an influence of the Western culture and education which was actually introduced to them as a strategic imperial means of domination by the British. The flow of Assamese youth to central India or to Western countries to get English education resulted in the imitation of western ideas to renew the varied facets of Assamese society and literature. Certain names were prominent among those educated youths like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Hemchandra Goswami, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Gohain Baruah etc.

It was Padmanath Gohain Baruah who was the first to introduce the genre of novel in Assamese literature in the year 1890 when he wrote the first ever Assamese novel *Bhanumati*. Since then great novelists have been contributing to the growth of Assamese novel age after age like Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Bina Baruah, Birendranath Bhattacharya, Mamoni Roysom Goswami, Homen Borgohain Jayashree Goswami Mahanta, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Juri Bora Borgohain to name some. Assamese novels have upgraded their narrative and structural techniques, adopted newer styles of composition from time to time till date that promises a very fertile ground of research on their stylistic and structural aspect. Arupa Patangiya Kalita's novels have created a benchmark by dint of their unique narrative style, characterization, choice of subject matters and their artistic treatment. She is one among the influential contemporary Assamese novelists renowned for her humanitarian as well as feminist standpoint. She has more than half a dozen of novels and a great number of short stories to her credit. Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2014, her works can boast of the representation of the rich texture and fervor of Assamese society and culture.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Research works have been extensively done on the thematic prospects of Assamese novels. However, their stylistic and structural aspect also needs

equal attention. Arupa Patangiya Kalita's novels are replete with the rich portrayal of Assamese society and culture. They are also very intricate in their style, structure, use of language, choice of the setting and the characters. The author's deep concern towards the downtrodden and the underrated group of people has introduced the readers to an unnoticed and un-glorified section of the society; and the way she has treated the lives of the peripheral folk in her novels may direct us to analyze her works through Bakhtinian lens of dialogism. This paper attempts to analyze the two selected novels of Patangiya Kalita, *Felanee* and *Jashnar Jhitas* from a dialogic point of view; with a special investigation to figure out how carnivalesque has triggered dialogism in the two narratives.

### Methodology

The methodology adopted for undertaking this research will be descriptive and analytic where the two selected novels by the author will be the primary texts and the research articles from multiple books and journals will be treated as secondary materials.

### Theoretical Background

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the Great Russian critical thinkers who had propagated the theory of Dialogism, believes that "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire life in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium" (1984a, p. 293) as cited in the essay "Dialogism and Carnival in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: A Bakhtinian Reading" authored by Hamed Faizi and Ali Taghizadeh. Thus, according to Bakhtin, living a life means participating in a dialogue, interacting and exchanging one's thoughts, ideas and opinions through conversations. Even our ideas and thoughts are ramifications of the existing thoughts and ideas already articulated and pondered over by someone else living in the same social order where we exist. Bakhtin has devised a couple of interesting notions to prove and consolidate the essence of Dialogism in a social order among which the notion of carnivalesque is one. Carnivalesque is influenced by the idea of the medieval carnival. He coined this term in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* to "describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival into everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature" (Cuddon, p.111 in Singh, Archana Sanjay's essay). The relationship between dialogism and carniva-

lesque is intertwining to such an extent that one of the critics of Bakhtin-ian dialogics, Kershner comments that a true novel is always carnivalised. Carnavalesque makes way to such an ambience where each and everyone living in a distinct social space can raise his voice, participate by exchanging his ways of life and thoughts and thus, an equilibrium is maintained irrespective of the question of class, caste, gender, religion, background or status hierarchy in the society; as Hamed Faizi and Ali Taghizadeh comment in the above mentioned essay that "Carnival gives way to dialogism and cancels the functioning of the hierarchies that want to prevent a free communication among characters" (p.p 110). Even though the carnivalesque occurs for a short period of time, it appears worthy to be lived by all equally and with equal opportunity of raising their voices and representing their positions in the society. It is actually a lived moment by the social people and thus, there is no distinction between the actor and the spectator in a carnivalesque moment as Bakhtin comments in the Introduction to his book *Rabelais and His World*: "...all were considered equal during carnival. Here...a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age" (p. 10).

However, there are a few characteristic features of a carnivalistic event in a novel whereby a novelist may exercise liberation among his characters. Carnivalistic novels entertain free expression and familiar interaction among the characters, portray unusual and eccentric behavior of social people, promote non-linear narrative, showcase disruption of power hierarchy in the society and glorify the non-celebrated lifestyles of the underrated section in the society. It even makes room for the representation of multiple voices and languages uttered by characters from varied social classes of people by rattling with the authoritative version of language. The authoritative prevalence of one language, the glorified depiction of one social class or romanticization of one specific way of life- all are dismissed or even split up in a carnivalesque narrative due to the author's concern for all the living creatures in a human social landscape or the intention of making novelistic space a symphonious one with many men's voices humming altogether. Whatever is unofficial and not widely accepted is reflected through a carnivalesque novel where the very ordinary and the comparatively meager or less significant ways of human life are celebrated. Through the use of ordinary speech forms and language types, the author of a carnivalesque novel makes way for the equal consideration of

the less privileged group of people in the society. However, the portrayal of grotesque body and grotesque laughter is also another prominent feature of a carnivalesque narrative. This theoretical understanding about carnivalesque would help in analyzing the two selected novels from a dialogic point of view so as to see how the author has employed carnivalesque elements to fit into her narrative prospect; thus rendering dialogism in her work.

### **Textual Analysis**

Written in two distinct time frames and also set in the backdrop of different historical points of time, the two selected novels of Arupa Patangiya Kalita, *Felanee* and *Jashnar Jhitas* deal with the portrayal of two groups of social people inhabiting in separate social backgrounds. The unfolding of the storyline and the use of language guides the readers to experience and observe a distinct picture of lived life of some underrated groups of people. *Felanee* was written in 2003 based on the insurgent time of the ethnic conflict that shook the lower part of Assam at the end of the twentieth century. It takes us to eyewitness the limitless suffering and pain the dislocated and relocated groups of people faced during and especially at the aftermath of the ethnic crisis held in the name of identity, of power position, of creation of new land or validation of the ethnic representation in mainstream politics of Assam. The story introduces the readers to a group of hardworking yet unfortunate people living in this specific land of unrest who speaks and communicates among themselves in their identical and usual manners; thus leaving less room for the upholders of higher groups of the society or those who always get a prioritized treatment.

The novel's namesake character here loses her husband, her home and the baby in her womb in the ethnic riot. She relocates to a slum area like the others who have lost everything in the same crisis. Felanee or Monir Maa who got her name because she was 'thrown away' after her birth has now been left with her only son Moni to start a life destined to pain and distress in the slum area chosen by the refugees of the local territory. She meets Kali Burhi, Bulen, Jonor Maak, Ratnar Maak, Minoti and many other such men-women in her new settlement whose life stories are presented in minute details by the novelist so as to make it evident that not only the lives of the rich and powerful are worthy to be portrayed in fictional space, but also the lives of the underprivileged; thus celebrating the ordinary and

the neglected as it is done in carnivalesque. Readers come to know about the conjugal life of Bulen and Sumola, of Minoti and the unknown insurgent leader, the story of Kali Burhi, of MonirMaa and the others which are usually not featured in fictional space with such an intense significance. They live lives of cordiality, of cooperation, of trust but of helplessness and which is portrayed with utmost care by the novelist here. These people are shattered by their destiny, yet they aspire to live by hook or crook. Apart from the details of the lived realities of the lives of these characters, the portrayals of their bodily images help us in decoding them in terms of grotesque realism. The body in carnivalesque is grotesque and it is always "in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body" (p.p 317, *Rableais and His World*). Kali burhi is left alone by her husband impregnated. Her family members too leave her to her own destiny due to the stain in her character, but she chooses to live by worshipping lord Kali and foretelling people's lives. She has an extraordinarily different and unconventional voice; a voice resembling that of a man's. She has an idol of Goddess Kali at her home whom she worships daily. Very frequently, she enters into a trance and appears like goddess Kali with a tuft of hair grown on her head and a big red vermillion bindi on her forehead. She gets transformed into another self which people out of fear, believe to be that of Mahakali. Once she is out of the trance, she becomes very weak, pale, and unable even to utter a word or to eat anything. This is a classic example of how a body is never closed down and is always in the process of action, transformation and renewal; thus upholding grotesqueness in its unique way. Jaggu's wife has a weak vagina and the doctor has advised to do a surgery to fix it. Not only the body's beauty and productivity, but also its degeneration, illness and defectiveness are important to prove that it is alive and active.

The author describes how Jaggu's wife pushes her vagina back inside when lifting herself up from sitting on ground which is very reflective of how carnival treats the grotesque body. By removing the vagina, Jaggu's wife could have been presented with a longer and regenerated life; a sense of relief at the cost of dismemberment of a diseased body part. The lack of treatment forced her to suffer in extreme pain, with the vagina getting rotten and spreading a sharp stink around; showing how human body is destined to dilapidation and death. Bulen's wife Sumola has gone mad and behaves like a little child. She has to be carried away by Bulen in his lap to feed her, to bathe her or to put her to sleep. This is very proper an

example of how human bodies degenerate while facing trauma and fear and such portrayal of a body by the author here makes it viable to understand the application of carnivalesque in her unique way. The portrayal of the lower bodily strata and the private body parts like the phallus; anus, mouth, bowels etc. is another feature of carnivalesque writing: "All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an inter-orientation...eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body- all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world..." (p. 317). Sumola would constantly hold the genital part of her husband and never allow him to leave her; thus showing her sexual desire. Ratna gets pregnant illicitly but is left out by the man in her fourth month. Her mother takes her to the middle of the forest, inserts a root of a tree inside her vagina, grabs the pile of flesh in her uterus and pulls it away: a process of abortion so horrific and fatal enacted to free her daughter of the ill fate of becoming an unmarried mother. The open vagina with the flow of blood releases the unwanted elements from the body and allows regaining a new life to Ratna; a life at the cost of another one. Nagen, another character in the novel, is traumatized by the continuous bandhs and curfews during the insurgency. He is left with no means of earning his livelihood as the local market was closed repeatedly for many days and months. He loses the balance of his mind and cuts off his penis and the neighbor gossiped about it this way: "Nagen has cut off his potato and eggplant" (p.206) in the novel. This actually can be regarded as an eccentric behavior that Nagen showcases and hurts his own body.

Carnavalesque novels always highlight such eccentric and unusual ways of life and the grotesqueness of the human body in the suffocating formal institution called society. Moreover, in the novel the author has utilized heteroglossia and created polyphonic impact with the use of it. The characters here live in a slum and usually they speak in colloquial languages while communicating with one another. The local boys that Moni meets after he settles with his mother in the slum speaks in a very carefree tongue: "Kiholbe? Babur maalaani de jaldi." ("Hei, What happened? Bring Babu's things quickly") (43), Kali Burhi tries to pacify MonirMaa by showing her a red chilli: "Women should become like these chillies..." (61) etc. All of

them have their own version of stories to share in their own languages and thus, the readers get to know about the differences of perspectives presented though the characters playing in the novelistic space, creating the polyphonic taste further. Towards the end of the novel, these helpless groups of people decide to raise their voice against the torture of the military officials whose presence in the area was threatening their miniscule lives: "It is same whether we live or die..."(243) Under the leadership of Felanee, the women in the slum go to the nearby army reserved camp to demonstrate against the illegal arrest of their sons and husbands. They vocally refuse to leave the place without taking back their men and protest there for three days and nights. They succeed in their venture and thus, the official way of controlling these people was ridiculed and upturned when they took back their men to their homes; showing how the social hierarchy gets evaporated in many circumstances in a carnivalesque space.

In the another novel *JashnarJhitas*, the author introduces one distinct group of people dwelling in the tea gardens of Assam who are usually called the tea garden laborers or in a more degenerative term 'coolie'. These are the people who were brought as laborers to work in the newly created tea gardens by the British during their colonial reign in the Northeastern part of India. They were recruited by the employed recruiters of the British officials called Aarkathiyas' with a false hope that they would live a prosperous life in Assam with enough food, healthcare, sanitation and habitation facilities. Durgi and her husband Dosaru are among those laborers whose journey to Assam and their stay in it has proved to be thetotally opposite. They and the other people of their group live in the 'nis line' or the 'low line' and the British officers have their separate colonies inside the gardens with all amenities for a prosperous life. The hierarchical position of the British is brought down again and again here in this novel. Periton Sahab (the ruler) is saved from death by Dosaru (the ruled) by killing the huge python which was actually worshipped by them; the attack of the python on Periton Sahab can be regarded as symbolic of the resistance the laborers who wants to show against the British. Durgi is made the mistress of Frezar Sahab and makes a family with her, loves her and provides her a house of her own. This act shows how the powerful Sahab descends from his supreme position as a ruler to love a coolie woman, live with her only because he needs to fulfill his physical desire; thus showing how the bodily needs of a human body may also lead to an upturn of a hierarchy.



However, when he leaves Durgi alone with her son and takes away their white toned daughter, Baby to England, Durgi decides to raise her voice against the discrimination she has been facing being the mistress of a White man all those long years of her life. She takes the role of a spy and shares the information of what is discussed or decided inside the British bungalow with the freedom fighters of Assam. This act of her actually shakes the position of the officials in the garden. This can be discussed as an act of protest on the part of Durgi as she very silently calculates in her mind about wiping out the white color from around the society: "Today Durgi too wishes to wipe out the white color at one go. The voice of victory resounds in her mind too. She murmurs in a hushing tone: "Bharat Mata ker Joy, Bande Mataram" (410). The author has explained how the lives of these working class subaltern group of people run inside the boundaries of the tea gardens by shedding light on their belief, faith, their aspirations, their fears, superstitions, rituals and so on which are all basically pagan. The grotesqueness of the body is reflected in the very first chapter of the novel where groups of laborers are being carried away in a ship and they are seen to be suffering from cholera. The graphic description of how the yellow discharges of a cholera patient gets mixed with the food prepared and served to the rest of the laborers onboard creates a sense of disgust and eerie feeling. People are shown dying, vomiting and doing potty and thus finally reaching the destination in the form of a group of lifeless creatures; thus picturing the grotesqueness emanating from the very basic actions of a diseased body. Durgi is attacked by leeches while plucking tea leaves. It goes through her vagina and starts sucking blood. In order to save her, her friends push and pour tobacco water inside her vagina until the leech comes out. The open vagina discharges the unwanted body of the leech from its inside and helps the older body live.

Moreover, the speeches uttered by the characters employ heteroglossia in the novel. The British officers and their parasitic employees speak in English and in a fusion of language of Assamese and English, the laborers speak in their ethnic identical language which is generally called the Baganiya language, the narrator of the story uses the standard Assamese language to explain the growth of events in the narrative; like Frezar talks to Durgi while trying to manipulate her to send their son to an orphanage: "Arthur will go...you illiterate woman...what do you want?...you coolie woman...then be a coolie..." (335-336), Durgi expresses her love for this new land of Assam: "Aitahamaraapondesh. Ehidesh me hamorsowaputa-

hotei.Hiyamerahatei.Hamohiyamemoroboi" (62), the narrator asks someone about Durgi in her visit to the tea gardens: "ApuniBaruDurgiBhumi-joksinipaisilne? Durgi pasot Durgi ma'am hoisil. Aikhon baganote asil. Teor Lob namorlora eta asil..."(436). The British has their own prospect of sustaining their own empire over the natives of Assam and they are in position to do anything for that, whether by bringing poor laborers from other states, deceiving them, exploiting them or so. The parasitic employees of the British have to retain their jobs under the British government and so, they too uphold the same imperial tantrum to treat the workers of the garden. The laborers who are exploited on multiple levels and deceived strategically extracting and demolishing their self esteem and human rights, express their dejected feelings in their own tongue; thus the whole narrative is instilled with diverse perspectives, voices and interpretations of events of life.

## **Conclusion**

The above analysis guides us to conclude that both the novels have employed dialogism through the elements of carnivalesque, heteroglossia and polyphony. Though the settings of the two narratives are different, the reflection of life as it appears in the two respective time frames is very authentic and lively. They are dialogic in the sense that they have confirmed and many times, contributed anew to the propositions of Bakhtin. The novelist has, however not touched the folk cultural practices or imageries like that of Rabelais while expressing grotesque realism, but she has beautifully explored the carnivalesque in terms of body and other actions related to it. The novelist here has let her characters speak in their own tongue; thus employing heteroglossia in the narrative. Characters here are free to express themselves as they feel, act as per their natural norms, perform rituals specific to their own community and uphold distinct ideologies to fit to their situational existence. The choice of the storylines for both the novels is fit to be characterized as carnivalesque because they don't represent an official and systematized picture of the society; rather they represent the social spaces lived upon by the subalterns and the dislocated groups of people for various reasons. The social hierarchy is inversed and the authority is questioned in the novel by "introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct(Abrams, p.63); thus promoting a carnivalesque reality through the two narratives.

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