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Exploring the Carnivalesque: Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* as a Subversive Narrative

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Abstract

The carnivalesque is a performative transgressive space where restrictions are temporarily displaced to reveal the inherent fluidity of structures and the subversion of hierarchy. Developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic and semiotician, the theory of the carnivalesque elucidates the liberatory dimensions of the carnival in the inversion of social hierarchies, thereby enabling the emergence of alternative possibilities. Andrew Sean Greer's novel *Less*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2018, unfolds a narrative which delves into the vulnerabilities of contemporary existence through the life of Arthur Less, a middling gay author who is on the verge of turning fifty. By employing Bakhtin's carnivalesque, the novel can be read as a socio-cultural critique which dismantles established notions of hierarchies through subversion. In the novel, the journey of Arthur Less represents the carnival's transgressive realm where existential anxieties and the constraints of selfhood are temporarily dissolved to accommodate space for the peripheral and the marginalised.

Keywords: Carnivalesque; Carnivalistic mésalliance; Eccentricity; Subversion.

Introduction

The importance of subversive narratives lies in their ability to critically interrogate and dismantle conventional constructs of identity and societal norms enhancing our understanding of the human. Andrew Sean Greer's novel *Less*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2018, unfolds a narrative which delves into the vulnerabilities of contemporary existence through the life of Arthur Less, a middling gay author who is on the verge of turning fifty. By employing Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the novel can be read as a socio-cultural critique which dismantles established

notions of hierarchies through subversion. Developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic and semiotician, the theory of the carnivalesque elucidates the liberatory dimensions of the carnival in the inversion of social hierarchies, thereby enabling the emergence of alternative possibilities.

The novel's narrative centres around Arthur Less, who is ensnared by the anxieties of his impending fiftieth birthday which coincides with the marriage of his former partner to a younger and more successful man. In an effort to evade these looming personal crises, Less embarks on a transcontinental journey from his hometown in San Francisco to a diverse array of destinations, including, a literary conference in Mexico, an award ceremony in Italy, a visiting professorship in Germany, a cultural sojourn in Paris, a desert encampment in Morocco, a writers' retreat in India and a non-fiction writing assignment in Japan. Through his escapades across varied locales, the narrative not only explores Less's internal struggles but also critiques the intersections of personal identity, professional validation, and the commodification of literary success in a globalized world.

Bakhtin and the Carnivalesque

Bakhtin defines the "carnivalesque" as a ritualistic spectacle which suspends traditional ideas and power structures through humour and chaos initially in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), which is expanded further in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). The carnival is a vital component of folk culture defined by its irreverent disregard for the hierarchical hegemonic structures of everyday life. Bakhtin traces its origin to the middle ages during which the sacred religious ceremonies were burlesqued. In *Rabelais and His World,* he observes that during the Renaissance era, a "boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" and laughter, which gave form to carnival rituals, liberated people entirely from the constraints of religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism (8). By assertively declaring freedom, carnival laughter facilitates a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (10). During the carnival it is revealed that the rules, regulations, and limitations of societal controls are temporarily suspended and the emotions of fear borne out of respect for authorities are abrogated .

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bhaktin observes:

> Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division

> into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life.* Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent "life turned inside out," "the reverse side of the world". (122)

The Categories of the Carnivalesque

The carnivalesque denotes both a socio-historical phenomenon and literary paradigm that disrupts conventional social hierarchies through the subversive, liberating power of humour, chaos, and inversion. According to Bakhtin, it is possible to delineate four broad categories within the carnivalesque: the familiar, the quirky, carnivalistic mésalliance, and the profane. These categories collectively play out the distinct social dynamics of the carnival, where conventional societal boundaries are momentarily dissolved enabling a free play of ideas (dialogism) and a polyphony of voices (heteroglossia). The first category, free and comfortable social interaction, is characterized by the convergence of individuals across various social strata, facilitating interactions that transcend entrenched socio-hierarchical distinctions. This inclusive milieu fosters connections between individuals who, under ordinary circumstances, might remain separated by class-based divisions.

The second category eccentricity offers the propensity for freedom to defy social norms, as participants of the carnival are often encouraged to engage in unconventional self-expression. This is manifested through the donning of costumes, the wearing of masks, or participation in performances that challenge established behavioural expectations. Carnivalistic mésalliance, the third category, relates to the fusion of dualities and the acceptance of fluid spaces where all norms pertaining to roles and identities are temporarily thwarted paving way for the playful distortion of societal hierarchies and a liberated domain of creativity in the true spirit of the carnivalesque. The final category, the realm of the profane manifests a release from the normative societal constraints through subversion by displacing authority figures and suspending religious observances which are traditionally sacrosanct. The veneration of the divine gives way to a celebration of the mundane and the corporeal where ample space is allotted for blasphemy and profanity.

Less as a Carnivalesque Novel

Elucidating the first category of the carnivalesque, free social interaction and the separation of hierarchical barriers, Bakhtin observes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

> Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals,* counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. (123)

In *Less*, the notion of free social interaction is evidenced through Arthur Less' escapades around the world, where he encounters a variegated crowd from across divergent social and political spectra including writers' retreats, literary conferences, and cultural gatherings, which disrupt and dissolve entrenched social hierarchies. The novel mirrors the carnivalesque dissolution of rigid social boundaries, offering a space where identities and relationships are fluid, reflecting Bakhtin's vision of the carnival as a domain of liberated human connection. In Paris, Arthur Less becomes part of a literary panel where there is an exchange of ideas among various writers both in the spirit of camaraderie as well as hostility where "he has done everything right and they have conned him once again" (132). This reflects Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia where multiple voices prevail. In Germany he encounters the rigid academia which takes on a note of high seriousness as opposed to his relaxed attitude to life which makes him yearn to "have someone other than a Derridean to talk with" (105). There are heated discussions about literature as well as human relationships which take on dialogic interactions at multiple levels.

In Morocco, he encounters a group of tourists from all around the world who are trapped in a sandstorm which result in moments of shared vulnerability revealing the flux of human interactions which transcend boundaries: "Arthur Less has travelled half way around the world in a cat's cradle of junkets, changing flights and fleeing from a sandstorm into the Atlas mountains" (194). Bakhtin's concept of free social interaction is subversive since it challenges traditional norms and societal structures. Although he is on the verge of turning fifty he is found struggling at var-

ious levels personally and professionally undermining the traditional notion that connects age with wisdom and authority. As a gay man, he travels across various political spaces where his identity often contrasts with the heteronormative norms but the very act of seamlessly moving across boundaries undermines rigidities and socio-cultural hierarchies. His personal life too becomes a subversive narrative as he undertakes the myriad journeys to escape from the wedding of his former gay partner which deconstructs the traditional romantic notion of ideal love and a happy ending as noted he "loses so much along the way: his lover, his dignity, his beard, his suit and his suitcase" (231).

The second category of the carnivalesque, eccentricity, employs humour as a closely intertwined tool to highlight the fact that eccentricities can be celebrated rather than stigmatized. In the novel the quirky behaviours and unconventional choices of Arthur Less provide comedic relief while revealing deeper traumas of identity and vulnerability. The upending of traditional expectations surrounding achievement, age, and romance is embodied in the novel by his experiences which are characterized by awkward interactions, professional setbacks, and ridiculous excursions. Less's self-deprecating wit transforms potential shame into relatable moments, emphasizing the idea that embracing eccentricity is essential for authenticity and resilience in a complex world. Throughout all of his travels around the world what is observed is his deviant ways; he stumbles through literary speeches, prefers to stay away in awkward isolation rather that mingle with the enlightened crowd he is supposed to interact with, whimsically undertakes a hot air balloon ride on sheer impulse during an official trip and even scrambles in a formal suit through the streets of Paris, to catch a train. Eccentricity permits societal norms to be suspended, which gives him the opportunity to revaluate and explore his identity. This is consistent with Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a place for rebirth and metamorphosis.

The third category, carnivalistic mésalliance—the fusion of opposites and the subversion of the normal—can be observed in the novel on many occasions when conventional relationships, roles, and identities are inverted in playful or unexpected ways:

> Here, looking at his clothes—black jeans foe New York, khaki for Mexico, blue suit for Italy, down for Germany, linen for India—Costume after costume. Each one is a joke, and the joke is on him: Less the gentleman, Less the author, Less the tourist, Less the hipster, Less the colonialist. Where is the real Less? The dead-serious

> Less of twenty-five years ago? Well, he has not packed him at all. After all these years, Less doesn't even know where he's stored. (33)

In the novel, carnivalistic mésalliance is explored as the aura of literary prestige is subverted and satirised. Arthur Less depicted as a middling author, is frequently thrown into situations where the literary establishment is elevated to an almost sacred status soon to reveal that this reverence is destabilized through the absurd and ironic portrayals of literary events. At a prestigious literary festival in Italy where he is invited as the guest of honour, Less exposes his vulnerabilities as he stumbles through the ceremony unable to understand the language. The intellectualism and literary aura he is expected to uphold as an author seems inconsequential as he celebrates his incompetence through farcical misadventures:

> There are numerous baffling interviews—"I'm sorry, I need the *interprete,* I cannot understand your American accent"—in which dowdy matrons in Lavender linen ask highly intellectual questions about Homer, Joyce and quantum physics. Less, completely below the journalistic radar in America, and unused to substantive questions, keeps to a fiercely merry-making persona at all times, refusing to wax philosophical about subjects he chose to write about precisely *because* he does not understand them. The ladies leave amused but without enough copy for a column. (92)

Less's role as an author is also an instance of carnivalistic mésalliance as it becomes evident that despite his lack of notable literary success he finds himself in elite, outrageously highbrow literary circles, attending parties that praise his mediocrity. In Italy Less realises that the jury for the Book of the Year comprises of an elderly committee which chose the five finalists while the final jury is made up of high school students. Less's scheduled academic reading in Germany "arranged by Pergasus Verlag, in association with the Liberated University and the American Institute for Literature, as well as the U.S. Embassy takes places not in the library… but in a nightclub" (117).The subversive narrative that results from these role-reversals blurs the lines between success and failure and momentarily upends the hierarchy of literature. Arthur's perpetual struggles to fit in as he navigates the different nations serve as embodiments of mésalliance breaking barriers and stereotypes. He outrageously exposes his cultural alienation as well his ignorance during many of this encounters with the media which run counter to the expectations from an author such as teaching at a writing workshop in Germany while experiencing a

language barrier or attending an Indian ceremony as a guest who barely knows the customs. These encounters create a carnivalesque inversion of his presumed role as an informed traveller and scholar by juxtaposing the expected lofty expectations and societal standards with the actual situations in his life often marked by alienation and discomfort.

Less's relationships with his romantic partners also become instances of carnivalistic mésalliance since there is a staunch defiance of traditional expectations of love and commitment. His liaison with Freddy, a much younger man, as well as his romantic entanglement with an older literary icon Robert Brownburn, are both mismatched and unconventional compared to the prevalent societal norms surrounding age, and the expectations of "appropriateness" in romantic relationships. This creates contrasting spaces where identity and societal roles are fluid, allowing an understanding of love outside conventional frameworks.

Bakhtin's realm of the profane which is the final category explored, is a space where meaning is conveyed by frequently employing the elements of comedy, satire, and the images of the grotesque. In this category, authorities are ridiculed, religious heads are snubbed and all forms of repression celebrated including the corporeality of the human body, its material dimensions and its primal urges including copulation and defecation besides hunger and thirst which are regarded as disruptions of the normal. In the novel queer resistance becomes a major force of disruption wherein the marginal is celebrated and the conventional gets momentarily dismantled. The socio-political implications of queer trauma are given wider access as humour becomes the sweetener that makes bitterness palatable. As Greer observes in the novel:

> We must show something beautiful from our world. The gay world. But in your books, you make the characters suffer without reward. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were Republican. Kalipso was beautiful. So full of sorrow. But so incredibly self-hating. A man washes ashore on an island and has a gay affair for years. But then he leaves to go find his wife! You have to do better. For us. Inspire us. Arthur. Aim higher. I'm sorry to talk this way, but it had to be said. (144)

In the novel, the imagery of the grotesque is employed to address the concept of aging. Throughout the novel Less is intensely conscious of the transformations of his body as age catches up with him; his concerns are often depicted in an absurdly exaggerated manner with the thrust often

on the grotesque. He constantly ruminates on his wrinkled face and sagging skin often exuding an air of irreverent mockery which undercuts the importance of such concerns. In the tradition of the carnivalesque there is a celebration of the grotesque body for its potential for renewal and regeneration as is observed in the novel when Arthur Less eventually becomes accepting of himself with all of his imperfections.

Profane humour is employed in the novel to heighten the absurdity of the series of rejections Arthur faces with composure masking his inner feelings of trauma and loss. Less's failed romantic encounters, the various awkward moments as the only American gay among an elite European crowd in a heteronormative space and the numerous cultural misunderstandings he undergoes are laced with self-deprecating humour which destabilises the seriousness of such occurrences. The genre of the traditional travelogue chronicling the hero's triumphant adventures is distorted in the novel to reveal how life's journey is not about overcoming hurdles or claiming rewards but stumbling through failures and finding acceptance. Narratives enable sufferers to reshape their identities by reconfiguring the memories of the past which are co constructed in conversation as private journaling is shared with a wider audience:

> Arthur Less—he suddenly stands very still, as one does when about to swat a fly. Don't let it go. Distractions are pulling at his mind—Robert, Freddy, fifty, Tahiti, flowers, the waiter gesturing at Less's coat sleeve—but he will not look at them. Don't let them escape. Laughable. His mind is converging on one point of light. What if it isn't a poignant wistful novel at all? What if it isn't the story of a sad middle-aged man on a tour of his hometown, remembering the past and fearing the future; a peripateticism of humiliation and regret; the erosion of a single male soul? What if it isn't even sad? (195)

Parody is another important feature of the carnival which employs laughter to subvert hierarchies and make radical inversions possible by dismantling fear and piety. According to Bhaktin as observed in *Problems of Doestovesky's Poetics*:

> This ancient ritualistic practice of directing laughter toward something higher (a deity or authority) defined the privileges of laughter in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Much was permitted in the form of laughter that was impermissible in serious form. In the Middle Ages, under cover of the legitimized license

> of laughter, "parodia sacra" became possible-that is, parody of sacred texts and rituals.
>
> Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. (127)

The novel employs parody to mock established certitudes pertaining to literary conventions and generic tropes. It can be read as a parody of the quest narrative as Arthur Less's journey across the globe becomes a series of awkward misadventures laced with comic interludes as opposed to the traditional grand narrative of a glorious heroic adventure.

The archetype of the bildungsroman is inverted as Less performs the role of an anti-hero whose transformation is more accidental than epic. The novel also parodies the concept of the midlife crisis as Less's fiftieth birthday coincides with the marriage of his former lover in such a way that the anxieties surrounding the occasion including societal notions pertaining to aging are grossly exaggerated. The conventional trope of the romantic narrative is displaced as Less's romantic entanglements are marked by anxieties, inconveniences and humorous failures. The subversion of the romantic trope offers a divergent take on established literary expectations surrounding real life relationships which are often too complex to be idealised.

Crowning and decrowning are prominent carnivalistic acts permeating all the categories and embody the joyful relativity of ambivalent duality. In *Problems of Doestovesky's Poetics*, Bakhtin elaborates:

> Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift- and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. 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)

In the novel, the protagonist, Arthur Less, in both his personal and professional life, experiences several moments of "crowning/decrowning" when he is elevated to a high, often absurd, status only to later strip him of the glory, humorously or tragically. As an accomplished novelist during

the early phase of his life, Less is crowned by success in the form of accolades and celebrity stardom but eventually gets decrowned as his latest work gets rejected and his career begins to wane. His romantic life too follows a similar pattern when he feels crowned as he finds love and companionship, only to be decrowned as his long-term relationship ends resulting in bouts of nervous breakdowns and perpetual self-loathing. This however, transitions a shift of world orders, of authorities and truths signalling the functional as opposed to the absolute as proclaimed in *Less*:

> The man began to welcome them all, and then his face brightened: "I admit I will be disappointed tonight if we reward the assimilationists, the ones who write the way straight people write, who hold up heterosexuals as war heroes, who make gay characters suffer, who set their characters adrift in a nostalgic past that ignores our present oppression; I say we purge ourselves of these people, who would have us vanish into the bookstore, the assimilationists, who are, at their core, ashamed of who they are, who we are and who *you* are!" (88)

Conclusion

According to Bakhtin, the world of the carnivalesque possesses a transformative power which enables all forms to hierarchical restrictions to be suspended through ambivalence, contrasts, and decrownings. The carnivalesque thus becomes a transgressive space where restrictions are temporarily displaced to reveal the inherent fluidity of structures and the subversion of hierarchy. By juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, the carnival challenges dominant ideologies to accommodate space for the peripheral and the marginalised. In the novel *Less*, the journey of Arthur Less represents the carnival's transgressive realm where existential anxieties and the constraints of selfhood are temporarily dissolved. Through the celebration of eccentricities, profanity, laughter and role play, the carnivalesque imagery in the novel attempts to create a world which mocks authority and subverts power dynamics which calls for egalitarian human exchanges that transgress societal constraints.

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