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She Stoops to Conquer: A Revel in Carnavalesque

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Abstract:

Mikhail M. Bakhtin is best known for his visionary conception of 'Carnavalesque', as a model for the regeneration of time and world as well as the emancipation of human spirit. 'Carnavalesque' generally refers to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos. It also offers a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to appreciate the relative nature of all that exists and to enter a completely new order of things. Bakhtin himself declares in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, that the carnival is the place for working out 'a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all powerful socio-hierarchical relationship of non-carnival life'. In carnival, everything is rendered ever-changing, playful and undefined. Hierarchies are overturned owing to inversions, debasements and profanations; performed by normally silenced voices and energies. My venture in this article is to re-read Oliver Goldsmith's renowned anti-sentimental comedy She Stoops to Conquer (1773) with the carnivalesque stances. This play is often termed as a 'comedy of manner', but how far the hypothesis goes with the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's proposed notions about Carnavalesque, will be my exploratory endeavour here.

Keywords: *Anti-sentimental, Carnival, Feast of Fools, Grotesque, Inversion, Topsy-turvy etc.*

1. Introduction

Oliver Goldsmith (1730-74), the son of an Irish protestant clergy spent a menial childhood both in Grammar schools as well as in Trinity College. His life literally changed after his meeting with Samuel Johnson, who often said of him, "No man was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had." After coming into contact with Johnson, he published one after another his masterworks: The Vicar of Wakefield (1766), The Good Natured Man (1768), The Deserted Village (1770) and the notorious She Stoops to Conquer (1773), among which the last one still holds the stage. The Restoration comedy was full of vitality and comic mirth, which holds the mirror to contemporary life and gives a faithful and realistic presentation of the frivolities and licentious practices prevalent in that age. Under its silent influence, sentimental comedy came into existence before the end of 17th century. Sentimental comedy arose out of a mistaken view of comedy, where true laughter, witty repartees and happy togetherness was missing altogether. More of the characters in such plays were genteel and virtuous, so there was scarcely any chance to ridicule the idiocy and absurdities to produce comic hilarity. Therefore, finally as a reaction to such affected, sentimental morality; a penchant for change was fervent among the audience. She Stoops to Conquer was a success on the stage. Goldsmith, through the means of the play evolves a comedy which expresses the return to nature, along with the reaction from sentimentality. He allowed the audience to know more about situations of the characters than they themselves aware of and thus succeeds in his aim of making his audience laugh.

2. Carnavalesque—Its Origin and Practices

The word 'Carnavalesque' was derived from the Latin words 'Caru' ('flesh') and 'levare' ('to put away'), therefore conjures the nominal 'a fest of flesh'. In general, a carnival is the occasion or season of revels, merry making, feasting and entertainment. During the carnival the populace lived a life turned upside down, their costume and actions depicting grotesque, contrast and pairing of opposites: youth and age, noble and lowly, sacred and blasphemous. The laws and hierarchies governing everyday existence were temporarily suspended and overturned in the ritual performances of the mock crowning and the subsequent uncrowning of the carnival king. It was like a 'time out' from normal rules and proprieties:

Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. (Rabelais and His World)

For Bakhtin, Carnival thus becomes a metaphor of release and expression, an indulged and highlighted state of merry making and profanation, flux and relativity which the hegemonic authority in a social system perhaps allowed as a safety valve or cathartic measure. The usual devices of carnival are general comedy, clowning, bawdiness, grotesque and topsy-turvydom. The general response to Carnival is laughter, a human reaction that serves to rupture the pretentious gravity of the authoritarian attitude. As Keith Brooker points out,

Carnival displays a tendency to break rules, transgress boundaries, destabilize hierarchies, and question authority of various kinds in their work. (Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque.)

Andrew Robinson too, has rightly observed "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power",

Carnival is also taken to provide a positive alternative vision. It is not simply a deconstruction of dominant culture, but an alternative way of living based on a pattern of play. It prefigured a humanity constructed otherwise, as a utopia of abundance and freedom. It eliminated barriers among people created by hierarchies, replacing it with a vision of mutual cooperation and equality. Individuals are also subsumed into a kind of lived collective body which is constantly renewed.

(<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/>)

Mikhail Bakhtin's has talked about four characteristics of the carnivalesque:

1. Familiar and free interaction between people: Carnival often brought the unlikely of people together and encouraged the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity.

2. Eccentric behaviour: Unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted in carnival, and one's natural behaviour can be revealed without the consequences.

3. Carnivalistic misalliances: Familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separated to reunite- heaven and hell, the young and the old, etc.

4. Sacrilegious: Bakhtin believed that carnival allowed for sacrilegious events to occur without the need for punishment. Bakhtin believed that these kinds of categories are creative theatrical expressions of manifested life experiences in the form of sensual ritualistic performances. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnavalesque>)

Despite the significance of Carnival as an arena for the staging of subversive energies, we must not forget that carnival in fact, is a sanctioned form of 'subversion' whose very purpose is to sublimate and diffuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion. Terry Eagleton, the Marxist thinker, has rightly pointed out, "Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art." (qtd in Hyperion and the Hobbyhorse: Studies in Carnavalesque Subversion, p.158). And, finally, the spirit began to deteriorate in the 17th century with the triumph of absolute monarchy and the birth of a new official "serious" culture. But still today, we feel that there is a need to recompose such powers to resist, in order to redrafting spaces where alternatives can proliferate.

3 She Stoops to Conquer- The Plot in Brief

She Stoops to Conquer is an amusing hilarious play. The subtitle The Mistakes of a Night describes better the incidental episodes. At the very outset, Goldsmith mentioned in the 'dedication' section, that this play is going to be something different from the traditional sentimental plays, which he termed as 'very dangerous' indeed. The prologue, too is a metaphorical assertion about his motif behind writing the play. The comic Muse is sick due to the 'mawkish drab of spurious breed/ who deals in sentimentals' and Goldsmith's role here is of a doctor, to treat the Muse with 'draughts' of genuine mirth and gleefulness. His play is an inversion of common sentimentality through its form and content, texture and structure, characters and events. From the very beginning there are elements of humorous wittiness which as well as producing laughter, points to the superfluous affectedness which adds feather to this play. To start from the beginning, we see Mrs. Hardcastle is bickering with her husband for his detestation for new fashion and stylish outlooks. Mrs. Hardcastle is foolishly fastidious for wearing unnatural city-craze to pose a much younger age, which makes her another object of ridicule. Tony Lumpkin is the pivotal revolving part of the whole plot. The subtitle "The Mistakes of a Night" describes his misdoings better. He was an illiterate, drunkard; and the stepson of Mr. Hardcastle, therefore Mr. Hardcastle was very objectionable about his misdemeanours. In an unexpected meeting with Marlow and his friend Hastings, coming to meet Kate Hardcastle for matrimonial engagements, he invents a master plan, and in spite of telling the actual route, he confused them more:

Tony. Then keeping to the right, you are to go sideways till you come upon Crackskull Common: there you must look sharp for the track of the wheel, and go forward till you come farmer Murrain's barn. Coming to the farmer's barn, you are to turn the right and then to the left, and then to the right about again, till you find the old mill – Marlow. Zounds, man! We could soon find the longitude!" (Act 1, Sc. ii).

He even tricks them into believing that the supposed house of Mr. Hardcastle is a long way to reach, and send them at the same destination by mischievously telling them the dilapidated house is no better than an inn. It was an act on his part to avenge against the grudging step father. This single trick creates a lot of tensions. Marlow's weakness to talk freely among the ladies of superior birth determined Kate to stoop to the role of a bar-maid. In the subplot too, Constance, the cousin of Kate, stoops to marry Tony, instead of Marlow's friend Hastings, because elopement with her lover Hastings would mar the possibilities of her getting the supposed inherited assets. Tony, the master mind, helped in their elopement by confusing her mother over a rough tract. All the mistakes finally dissolved and the two couples met their ultimate nuptial knot.

4 Facets of Carnavalesque

As I have already mentioned, Carnival means a satiric representation of topsy-turvyism. Through Tony, the essential architect of all the mistakes, Goldsmith describes the follies latent in society and its inhabitants. Mrs. Hardcastle is obsessed about new fashions in

township, which makes her no better than a caricature of ridicule. Marlow's misconception of the house as an inn and Mr. Hardcastle as the inn keeper creates genuine laughter. Mr. Hardcastle's tendency to provide them delicious food and his company irks them more. Their impertinent and rude behaviour to Mr. Hardcastle makes him to reject Marlow as her daughter's suitor. Thus, Mr. Hardcastle, the owner of the house is represented to be a mere inn keeper by their delusion. Kate, already knowing the truth, is determined to win him through any possible means. She knew Marlow's 'Englishman's malady' but still goes on with the Barmaid's role to confiscate this frailty. She therefore uncrowns herself to the role of a barmaid and ultimately accomplished in her diplomacy. This uncrowning and subsequent mock crowning is one of the chief features of carnivalesque. Carnival also means 'feast of the fools', in this play too, there is a reference of a sumptuous dinner arranged for the guests, which eventually they refused in apprehension of paying money. Another hilarious incident lies in the subplot. Tony helped Hastings and Constance to elope and arranged them to get Constance's jewellery box, which Hastings deposited at Marlow. But, Marlow unknowingly returns it to Mrs. Hardcastle again, washing out their plan of elopement. Mrs. Hardcastle was pleased with Hastings for his inflated praises to her faded beauty, but when she comes to about his actual plot, she orders Constance to be removed from there. Tony deceived his mother in their journey by running through same tract again and again and at last made her drenched in the horse-pond. Tony, the worthless thus becomes Tony, the architect of the plot. Mr. Hardcastle was unwilling to give his consent knowing Marlow's impudence and revelry, but all the mistakes have been solved by Kate's witty management of the circumstances. All the misunderstandings were cleared at the end; the lovers were united with their accepted beloveds, and the play concludes with its desired happiness with Mr. Hardcastle's resolved fortitude: To-morrow we shall gather all the poor of the parish about us, and the mistakes of the night shall be crowned with a merry morning. So boy, take her; and as you have been mistaken in the mistress, my wish is, that you may never be mistaken in the wife. (Act.V, Sc.III)

5. Conclusion

Thus, from my analysis, I can say that the play is abundant in carnivalesque components. The supposed degradation of Mr. Hardcastle from the owner to an inn keeper, the overtures of laws for a night, Mrs. Hardcastle's dilapidated ride under Tony's tricks, Kate's stooping, Constance's stooping for assets, Marlow's maladies and the unravelling of all at the end create true laughter among the audience. At the same time, the superfluous fashions of ladies, traditional orthodoxies, uncomfatability of the upper class gentlemen and of course stickiness to money – are all presented through delicate touches of humorous strokes. The traditional sentimentality finds no vestige of existence here, and the elements of satire help to barb the comic spirit into an elevated echelon.

6. References

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