

**Carnival Beyond Borders:
Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer and Carter**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut
for the award of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English Language and Literature**

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Declaration

I, **SHAMEEMA, T.**, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **Carnival Beyond Borders: Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter** submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature**, is a bona fide work done by me under the guidance of **Dr. K M. Sherrif**, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Calicut, and that I have not submitted it or any part of it for any degree, diploma or title before.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Carnival Beyond Borders: Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter** submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature**, is a bonafide work carried out by **SHAMEEMA, T.**, under my guidance and supervision. Neither the dissertation nor any part of it has been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma or title before.

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Contents

		Page No.
	Introduction	1 - 22
Chapter - I	World Inside Out Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnavalesque	23 - 51
Chapter - II	A Jewish Joke	52 - 103
Chapter - III	Voices from the Underground	104 - 171
Chapter - IV	Darkness of the Womb	172 - 211
Chapter - V	Feast for All	212 - 245
Chapter -VI	The Ludic Game	246 - 293
	Conclusion	294 - 303
	Bibliography	204 - 321

Introduction

I. “All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of laughing people” (*Rabelais* 474). This categorical statement by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin reflects his vision of life and the role of laughter in it. He sees laughter as a mechanism with potential enough to heal and transform. This is what informs his reputed concept of the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin is one of the most prominent of literary and cultural theoreticians today. He has probed the celebratory aspects of Europe’s medieval folk culture and its impact on the Renaissance carnival. With its varied festive, cultural forms and activities, carnival gradually made its way into literature, too. Bakhtin sees in the works of the French Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais, a powerful literary expression of the carnival spirit. Scrutinizing his fictional narratives, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, Bakhtin commends his outstanding use of the carnivalesque mode. Body and bodily gestures, folk language, laughter, mockery, degradation, and protest are remarkable features of Rabelais’ works. Rabelais’ scatological imagery and vulgar language are unconventional and anti-canonical. It subverts the serious and hypocritical institutions, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals and politics of his times. It is on account of this, that the term Rabelaisism is often used to

denote a highly humorous and laughter provoking narrative style. The milieu and culture, Rabelais projects belong to what Bakhtin calls the lower bodily stratum. Rabelais' characters live a thoroughly human life, reveling in bodily pleasures, confronting misfortunes and vicissitudes with both mind and body, and surmounting them through laughter. Bakhtin's views on his carnivalesque mode are embodied in his ground-breaking study, *Rabelais and His World* (1965). They have opened up fresh avenues for the study of life, literature, and culture.

Examining the influence of the carnival tradition on literature, Bakhtin mentions certain writers of the past whose works are notable for the presence of the carnivalesque elements. Boccaccio, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky are some of them. Bakhtin discusses the major features of the carnivalesque, elaborately drawing upon events and episodes in Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. Laughter, marketplace language, material bodily lower stratum, popular festive imagery, grotesque body, and banquet imagery are among them. Polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope are also important markers of the carnivalesque mode.

We live in an age in which the study of language, literature, and culture has gone significantly beyond the traditional and conventional modes of analysis. This is intune with the tremendous changes overtaking life and society the world over. Every aspect of society is investigated into from

multiple angles. In such a context, an interdisciplinary approach exploiting the potential of theories and concepts extant in different branches of knowledge can only make the study of literature profounder, more relevant, and more meaningful. As such, Bakhtin's contribution to literary theory, particularly his concept of the carnivalesque, which is increasingly being explored by literary and cultural scholars, assumes considerable importance. The carnivalesque is a complex term with meanings and resonances which relevant and applicable to literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, political science, anthropology, gerontology, thanatology, body studies, and eco-criticism. The idea that the love of fun and festivity is native to man is pivotal to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. This truth can be detected in the increasing carnivalisation or festivalisation of a plethora of our social and cultural functions and activities. The carnivalesque temper is omnipresent in the contemporary world. It is, therefore, small surprise if writers belonging to different cultures have resorted to the carnivalesque as a narrative mode in order to represent the reality around them.

The carnivalesque celebrates difference, playfulness, open-endedness, instability, grotesque body, as natural aspects of human condition. In literature, it can be used to serve as an effective subversive strategy. At the literal level, it embraces all forms of festivities and all celebratory aspects of cultural life. At a metaphoric level, it is subversion, transgression, and revolution aimed at creating alternative social spaces where people are free to

communicate without constraints, and are not afraid of asserting their legitimate right to life. In the process, oppressive officialdom and its ideals are mocked, degraded, and sometimes, even destroyed. Hinging on laughter, the grotesque body, and even blasphemy, the carnivalesque casts an ironic and skeptical eye on all authoritarian verities and values pointed up as being perfect, complete, fixed, serious, and dogmatic. It underscores the basically shifting, fluid, unstable, and incomplete nature of human existence. For, it can pave the way for changes in hierarchical systems and institutions of power. Accordingly, it foregrounds what has over the years been constructed as being unofficial, peripheral, non-normal, inferior, and sub-standard. In other words, the carnivalesque functions as a leveling force, prompting better relations between peoples, cultures, and also between man and nature.

II. The present study is an analysis of select fiction using Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. The stress is on how, in the selected works, the carnivalesque is used as a narrative mode to explore the issues of power, race, gender, caste, and ecology. Ideas from such fields of study as feminism, gender studies, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism, cultural studies, and eco-criticism have also been relied on when found relevant to the Bakhtinian theory. The novels taken up for the study are *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) by Philip Roth, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, *Sangati* (1994) by Bama, *Pathummayude Aadu* (1959) by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) by Angela Carter.

Using the carnivalesque as an analytical tool an attempt has been made to bring together these novelists who have entirely different cultural, political, religious, and racial backdrops. They have all of them used the same carnivalesque, which is an index of the fact that their world view is basically carnivalesque. This in turn shows that irrespective of differences in terms of country and culture, man everywhere has the indestructible capacity, desire, and predilection for a life of fun and joy.

This dissertation entitled, *Carnival Beyond Borders: Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter* has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter, “The World Inside Out: Bakhtin’s Theory of the Carnivalesque”, is an introduction to the theory of the carnivalesque. The central features of the carnivalesque are discussed here. The concept of polyphony which derives from Bakhtin’s study of Dostoevsky, and the notions of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope which he explores through four of his essays included in his book *Dialogic Imagination* have also been touched on. The chapter also draws attention to some of the disciplines which have appropriated Bakhtin’s ideas. This has been done particularly because the extensions of his ideas are helpful in better understanding his concept of the carnivalesque.

The second chapter, “A Jewish Joke”, explores the carnivalesque elements in the American novelist, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).

Roth puts the carnivalesque to excellent use in his representation of the socio-cultural life of the Jewish-American minority community, against the background of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. The novel abounds in transgressions and subversions. Its protagonist Alexander Portnoy is a third-generation Jew. His world-view is at odds with that of his conservative Jewish family. His experiences at home clash with his experiences outside, making him react rebelliously. His acts turn subversive of the moral and religious norms and austerities at home. Unabashedly, he breaks taboos. Portnoy's body with its sexual grotesquery is at the centre of the novel. His dilemmas make a tragic farce of his life and he ends up as a neurotic on the psychoanalyst's table. Portnoy's parents are portrayed as being clownish or devilish. Roth uses the carnivalesque mode to laugh at the Jewish sense of moral superiority and the Jewish prejudices toward the Gentiles. Roth also unveils the shocks and dilemmas of the Jewish diaspora, particularly when it comes to cultural adaptation. He shows how religion and cultural heritage turn out to be stumbling blocks to Jewish assimilation into the American cultural melting pot. He also shows how cultural and identity politics of an unrelenting nature can damage a harmonious and peaceful coexistence between people belonging to varied backgrounds. Portnoy's exploits and his family's fears and anxieties constitute an enormous source of carnivalesque laughter in the novel.

The third chapter, “Voices from the Underground”, considers the Black American novelist Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the racial issues it treats, again from a carnivalesque perspective. The Blacks in the dominantly white American society has always had a grotesque life. Their skin, race, and culture have been the major factors working against them and making them an inferior community in the eyes of the whites. Ellison humorously brings out the struggles and harrowing experiences of the American blacks. The protagonist is an Invisible Man and he has no name in the novel. He dwells, hibernating as it were, in an underground basement. This grotesque image is the first cue at the novels’ celebration of what Bakhtin calls “the material lower bodily stratum.” Black humour, Southern black dialect, tall tales, blues and Jazz, and tricksterism are among the folk elements which contribute to its carnivalesque texture. The capacity to laugh, which the blacks evince in their attempts to overcome adversities and persevere, is highlighted. Also, Ellison laughs at those blacks who would like to keep up a pure black identity without fully understanding its implications. In America, black and white cultures are inextricably intertwined. This is amply evident in such American cultural forms as jazz. Even language and sartorial styles bear the marks of this confluence. Similarly, Ellison debases those blacks who acquire power and positions by being abjectly subservient and also by imitating the whites. For, they often forget the general predicament of their community, assume self-centered and authoritarian postures, and become part of officialdom. The

carnavalesque in the novel debunks both Black nihilism and White dominance. Ellison also caricatures historical figures and events. The comic dimensions of black history and the revolutionary energies inherent in the black community are also effectively brought out by means of the carnivalesque mode.

The fourth chapter, “Darkness of the Womb”, identifies the carnivalesque in the Tamil dalit feminist writer Bama’s *Sangati* which focuses, in unmistakable celebratory terms, on the experiences of the paraiya, Christian dalit women. In the process, the dalit predicament in general is also exposed. A remarkable contribution to dalit women’s writing, the novel makes unstinted use of humour, songs, rituals, festivals, and other aspects of folk life to construct the novel’s carnivalesque world. Admirably enough, Bama expands the pale of literary language to comprehend the paraiyas’ colloquial vocabulary which, as in the case of most folk communities, includes abusive vulgar and obscene expressions, too. There is a certain amount of radicalism about her use of language, since it contests the canonical and hegemonic language norms of the dominant. In many respects, the paraiyas are an oppressed lot. The accountability for this rests with patriarchy, casteism, religion, and government, which are forms of authority and officialdom. On the one hand, Bama, who is an insider, though recalcitrant, paints a picture of the paraiya women’s woes. On the other, she brings to light the various survival strategies they adopt to mock and debase

the systems of oppression. These strategies predominantly involve laughter, grotesque gestures, and abusive language. They help them preserve their spirits and liveliness, in the midst of gloom and wretchedness. The paraiya women, as imaged by Bama, have creative and artistic talents, too. They are shown as not only as singing songs but also improvising them, as well. Their inner capabilities derive from their folk culture. At the same time, Bama does not hesitate to put her finger on their foibles and infirmities. She interrogates their meek and unthinking practice of religious and patriarchal rituals and customs. She also cavils at their obsequious and suppliant behaviour in their familial life. However, she also depicts some of the women as possessing immense revolutionary fervor, thereby suggesting that there are also seeds of change slowly sprouting on the community's landscape. The carnivalesque in the novel is an index of Bama's optimism about her people.

The fifth chapter, "Feast for All", explores the carnivalesque in the Malayalam novelist Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's *Pathumma's Goat*. The topographical significance of the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin points out in his discussions of 'the lower bodily stratum' and of the 'chronotope' are of particular relevance here. They can enable a better understanding of Basheer's deep ecological vision and egalitarian outlook as expressed in the novel. Significantly enough, the novel shows that the carnivalesque is an aspect of the ecosystem, too. To put it in different words, the carnivalesque spirit is in accord with the laws of nature, with the cosmic scheme. Humour, perhaps, the

most striking feature of Basheer's fiction has been a striking aspect of his life, too. A profound concern for all creation is characteristic feature of his works. A considerable number of his characters are tricksters and merry-makers. In terms of characters, there is god's plenty in his novels. Even those like thieves, who are generally looked down upon, are depicted by Basheer in a lively, humorous, and empathetic way. This is especially because of his carnivalesque outlook on life. He has always viewed life as a type of fun. It is this temperament that makes him a champion of even animal rights which is an important theme explored through the figure of the goat in the novel. His use of animals and popular festivities is striking in their appeal and their power to produce hilarious laughter. The language of the novel is unconventional; it is also conducive to laughter. Basheer's use of neologisms, dialect, and colloquial expressions also functions as a subversive device in the novel. *Pathumma's Goat* shows the carnivalesque plurality, collectivity, and interconnectedness, of the myriad entities, animate as well as inanimate, that constitute the miraculous phenomenon known as the universe of which Basheer has always been intensely conscious.

The sixth chapter, "A Ludic Game", is an analysis of the British feminist writer Angela Carter's use of the carnivalesque mode in her novel, *Nights at the Circus*. In her hands, it becomes a feminist and postmodern narrative technique to treat issues of gender, female body, and sexuality. Heterotopia and the grotesque body are plenteously used to debunk accepted

notions about body, identity, and sexuality. The monolithic, patriarchal constructs of heterosexuality and motherhood are debased through the images of the grotesque body with its fluids and orifices. The female protagonist of the novel is the hump-shouldered Sophie Fevvers. The image of the dual bodied Fevvers is a powerful device Carter uses to mock gender categories. The revolutionary and transformative potential of the carnival body is shown through some of the female characters who turn lesbians in the novel. Circus is central to the novel. With its charivaris, clowns, singers, acrobats, and animals, it serves as a powerful, pervasive symbol of the carnivalesque. Carter's demythologizing strategy also has a carnivalesque dimension about it. Her allusion to mythological figures is also accompanied by humour and fun.

It may be suggested that no one who reads these novels can fail to notice the delightful use of the carnivalesque in them. The descriptions, which center on the corporeality of both man and beast and the desires, appetites and activities allied to it, are a distinguishing mark of these novels. There is a clear celebration of the bizarre and non-normal in them and this is largely instrumental in making these novels effectively subversive. They all foreground the socially marginalized categories of people like runaways, bastards, prostitutes, circus women, animals, pickpockets, and the physically challenged. The world they depict in terms of their characters, language, events, and episodes is an odd one, designed, as it were to disrupt and contest

the dominant hierarchies, binaries, norms, and practices of officialdom. Through a number of memorable characters, and their actions, the novelists have brought out the irresistible human desire to live a carnivalesque life.

If we look at the world around us, an interest in the grotesque and bizarre can be detected. The traditional, the sacred and the ideal are all profaned in a humorous way. A number of cultural forms like fashion, film, commercials, tourism, and our day to day life are all influenced by the spirit of the carnivalesque. In such a milieu and environment the modes of literary expressions will also take on new dimensions.

III. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has indisputably been a major topic of discussion among scholars after the publication of his *Rabelais and His World*. It has been hailed by a number of critics and theorists as an effective mode of representation in literature and other cultural forms. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, Clark and Holquist, Morson and Emerson, Craig Brandist, Hitchcock, Ivanov, Pechey and, most recently, Sue Vice are some of those who have done significant work on Bakhtin. Feminists like Wayne Booth, Mary Russo, Julia Kristeva, and Dale Bauer have also been contributors to the debate on Bakhtinian ideas. The work of these critics and commentators, which is predominantly of an expository nature, has been remarkably insightful and has brought to light the implications and ramifications, relevance and significance of Bakhtin's ideas in relation to such

areas of study as literature, language, culture, and gender. The carnivalesque as Bakhtin conceives of it has different aspects to it and they have all been seen positively by these commentators. Nevertheless, some of them have been a little sceptical of its revolutionary potential which Bakhtin finds embedded in it. They consider this vision of the carnival as potentially revolutionary, as possessing deep within it the power and energy to eventually bring about changes in society to be utopian and far-fetched. Even though they find it hard to accept the revolutionary nature of the carnivalesque, they admit its power to pave the way for transgression and subversive alternative spaces. It may be suggested here that acts of transgression and subversion imply dissatisfaction with the norms of society; they are an expression of the desire for and tendency toward the need for change. As such, when they occur repeatedly and consistently and are indulged in by more and more people, there is probability that what has been the norm or tradition would be subjected to serious review and re-examination which might lead to ending it or changing and modifying it. The carnivalesque, when viewed in this light, becomes revolutionary. For, carnival is, as Bakhtin has pointed out, revolution at bottom.

A review of the literature existing on the writers under study shows that there is a considerable amount of criticism on Roth, Carter, and Ellison. The criticism available on Basheer may be said to be quite sparse. This is because his works, particularly his novels, have not so far been subjected to

in-depth studies and close analysis. Critical scholarship also seems to have been rather slow in exploring Bama's works. As a result, the criticism available on Bama is pretty meagre. The fact that emerges from a survey of the critical literature extant on the novels discussed in this study is that none of them has intensively and exhaustively been studied from the perspective of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, closely focusing on the text of the novel and identifying the scenes, incidents, characters, and language where the various features of the carnivalesque are in manifest operation as a narrative mode. Besides, no research has been done linking Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter in terms of the carnivalesque and bringing together five of their novels written against vastly different historical and cultural backgrounds. To approach these novels applying the Bakhtinian vision of the carnivalesque is to read them from a fresh angle and to see the universality of the principle of laughter effectively exploited through the carnivalesque narrative mode, by creative writers in all climes and cultures.

Until very recently, Bama was little known beyond the borders of Tamil Nadu. However, with the translations of her works *Karukku* and *Sangati* from Tamil into English by Laxmi Holmstrom, her reputation as a novelist got well established and she has been able to attract a wider readership. In the years ahead, this would lead critical scholarship to pay more of attention to her works and to study them in greater detail. The process of the growth and accumulation of critical work in terms of articles and books on

a particular author is, at times, a slow process and this seems to be currently the case with Bama. At this juncture, it may not be presumptuous to suggest that Bama's works will inevitably elicit a considerable amount of serious and exhaustive critical literature. For, Bama is a novelist whose concerns are serious and socially relevant and whose mode of narration is remarkably delightful. Holmstrom's translations are a testimony to the fact that Bama is a writer of value and has to be seriously reckoned with. The criticism available on Bama, as has been pointed out earlier, is rather sparse. Most of it lacks in depth and intensity, and focuses largely on her preoccupations with caste and gender. The accent has insistently been on her treatment of caste and gender politics and issues in relation to the dalit Christians of Tamil Nadu and on projecting her only as a dalit feminist writer and activist rolled into one. Accordingly, her name figures in some of the general studies on contemporary dalit feminist literature in India. *Dalit Literatures in India* edited by Joshil. K Abraham and Judith Misrahi is one among them. Here, there is a discussion, in the shape of a survey, on Bama's *Karukku*. However, it is quite brief and it occurs in the midst of discussions on other dalit writers. A brief analysis of Bama's *Sangati* appears in *Life as a Dalit: Views from the Bottom on Caste in India* edited by Subhadra Channa and Joan P Mencher. Passing references to Bama and to her feminist stance can be found in a few books devoted generally to the study of Dalit writing. As such, it may safely be said that there is, as yet, no book-length study exploring Bama's works

from all sides and giving a comprehensive picture of her varied thematic interests and of her narrative strategies. This is particularly true of the carnivalesque narrative mode which she employs in *Sangati* and which powerfully contributes to the social awareness and enlightenment she provides so gleefully in the novel.

In the history of Malayalam fiction, Basheer's works stand out, particularly by virtue of his tremendous capacity to treat the ordinary incidents and characters of life using a largely unconventional language and a strikingly hilarious narrative mode. The element of delight and humour is uppermost in all his novels and it operates without undermining the importance and concern with which he presents social and cultural issues in them. Initially, there was reluctance on the part of Malayalam critics and writers to accept him as a novelist of consequence. This was mostly because of his conspicuous deviations from the conventionally accepted standards of literary Malayalam and also because of the extreme brevity of his novels. Subsequently, the reluctance gave way to adoration and a reception with an almost unprecedented warmth into the fold of great Malayalam novelists and story tellers. To some extent, he has now a global recognition which was made possible primarily by R E Asher's translation into English of his *Pathummayude Aadu* as *Pathumma's Goat*. Basheer was, perhaps, the first to demonstrate the off-beat creative potential of Malayalam language and the effect with which they could be exploited in Malayalam fiction. Scholarly

interest in Basheer has never waned ever since his recognition as a remarkable writer; it still continues. A brief look at the criticism available on Basheer reveals that most of it concerns itself with generalities, without sufficient efforts being made to incisively probe the variety and profundity of his themes and ideas and his unfalteringly delightful manner of relating his stories. The brevity, simplicity, comedy, and humour, which are hallmarks of his fiction, often camouflage his serious reflections and visions on a diversity of socio-cultural and political issues which underlie most of the scenes and incidents of his novels. Only close and painstaking scrutiny of the texts of his novels alone can do justice to this aspect of Basheer's fiction. The absence of such scrutiny, it may be suggested here, is a lacuna in the criticism extant on Basheer. In the books and articles recounting Basheer's personal and political life, he is generally placed within the context of India's freedom struggle and of the Muslim minority culture of Kerala. Most of the studies on Basheer have appeared in Malayalam. And in all of them, the focus has repeatedly been on his deeply philanthropic outlook, and his ecological concern encompassing both nature and the animal world. Notable among the critics who have studied Basheer are Karoor, M P Paul, M N Vijayan, M K Sanu, Mangad Ambikhasudhan, M.N Karasseri, P. K Parakkadvu, M.A Rahman, and Jamaludheen. The works of these critics are, no doubt, worthwhile contributions to Basheer scholarship, providing useful insights into his works and thereby enabling his readership to have a better

understanding of Basheer, the man and the novelist. However, none of these works have attempted to explore, from a Bakhtinian perspective, Basheer's carnivalesque mode and vision of life as expressed either in *Pathumma's Goat* or any of his other novels.

The profound impact which Ralph Ellison's fiction, especially *Invisible Man*, has had on American literature is indisputable. A highly powerful novel, *Invisible Man* has been enthusiastically read and discussed by both black and white critics and scholars. The result has been a sizeable body of criticism on it. A major work of scholarship is Jacqueline Covo's *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and His American, French and Italian Critics*. Other noteworthy books include *Five Black Writers*, edited by Donald B. Gibson, and *Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man": A Case book* edited by John F Callahan, and *The Critical Responses to Ralph Ellison* edited by Robert Butler. One of the most intriguing facts, however, is that there is as yet no book-length and comprehensive biography of Ellison. Nevertheless, there are some critical works such as those edited by James M Ethridge and Barbara Kopala, which help us with necessary biographical details for understanding Ellison's life and background. Perhaps, the most informative and intensive study on Ellison is the collection, *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by John Hersey. In one of the two pieces, which Hersey himself has authored and which are included in the collection, he furnishes a detailed account of the lives of Ellison's parents, their influence on him, and the socio-cultural milieu

in which he grew up. In most of the critical studies, the emphasis has been on Ellison's treatment of racism, slavery, the social marginalization of Afro-Americans, and Afro-American identity crisis. There has also been interesting scrutiny of his concern with the intricacies of power, control, dominance, and subjugation as they operate in society. Ellison's interest in black folklore, black humour, and black cultural forms like jazz and blues has also been examined by critics. Stanley Edgar Hyman has to his credit one of the most significant essays on the importance of folklore in *Invisible Man*. There are, indeed, critical works of a comparative nature, which look into the question of what differentiates Ellison's works from Richard Wright's or from other Black-American writers. Critics have also been eager to assess Ellison's contribution to the Black-Art Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. Remarkable among the critics, who have viewed Ellison from these angles are Houston A Baker, Tony Tanner, Barbara Foley, Robert G O Meally, Henry Louis Gates, Jackson, Gene Bluestein Flyod R. Horowitz and Lawrence Patrick. Critics have also sought to situate Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the context of Modern as well as postmodern Afro-American Literature. In the context of this dissertation, a couple of critical works are of special note. One of them is William Henry Lyne's *An Invisible Dialogue: James, Ellison, Bakhtin and the Middle Ground of the Modern Novel* and the other is Christopher Shinn's "Carnival, Magic, and Masquerade in Ellison's *Invisible Man*." Lyne confines himself to discussing Bakhtin's dialogism alone

whereas Shinn is more enlightening on some of the elements of the carnivalesque. Both the studies, though not exhaustive, are helpful in any in-depth and elaborate study of Ellison's use of the carnivalesque mode of narration in *Invisible Man*.

Philip Roth has been a sensational figure to the twentieth century American fiction. Most studies on his works, particularly his novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, focus on his representation of Jewish-American culture, Jewish identity crisis, and his treatment of gender, sexuality and pornography. His satirical vision of American politics, his use of postmodern strategies, and his sense of humour have also been major concerns of critics. These aspects of his fiction have been intensively examined by scholars like Derek Parker Royal, Elaine Safer, Mark Shechner, Harold Bloom, Alan Cooper, Brett Ashley Kaplan, and Hermione Lee. *Critical Essays on Philip Roth* edited by Sanford Pinsker contains significant contributions to Roth criticism, examining the various thematic concerns in his fiction. There are two notable articles which touch on the elements of the carnivalesque in *Portnoy's Complaint*. One of them is "Transgression and Liberation: Carnavalesque Elements in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*" by Rama Naga Hanuman Alapati, and the other is "Roth, Ethics, and Carnival" by Astruc Remi. Alapati's emphasis is on how Roth carnivalises the acts of sexual transgression Portnoy commits in a spirit of nonchalance and liberation. Remi sees carnival as a general comic event possessing two major aspects, one

comical and the other savage. And it is with this vision that he explores Roth's fiction. Both the articles are insightful but they do not concern themselves with an analysis of Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* or his fiction specifically from the point of view of Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque in all its aspects.

As a novelist, Carter is at once funny, innovative, subversive, and serious. Although she was neglected in the early years of her writing career, in the later years, she received immense critical attention and was catapulted into the position of one of the best of English novelists. The critical books, articles, and other works on her fiction mostly concentrate on her use of myths, fairytales, fantasy, and magical realism. Her deconstructions of the female body, her demythologising strategies, and her postmodern feminism have all been commented on by scholars and critics. Sara Gamble's *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, Lorna Sage's *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, and Edmond Gordon's *The Invention of Angela Carter* are some of the most significant and in-depth studies on Carter. Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesques: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* is an equally important work. A noteworthy aspect of this work is its focus on Carter's delineation of female characters in her fiction and also on the prominence of female grotesquerie in her *Nights at the Circus*. Studies comparing Carter with other writers like Margaret Atwood and Virginia Woolfe have also been done. There are also studies which reveal her

predilection for the use of intertextuality, parody, and other stylistic features. The book, *Angela Carter* by Linden Peach is a noteworthy work which contains an interesting chapter touching on some of the features of the carnival in *Nights at the Circus*. The chapter is titled “Spectacle, Circus, and the films of Federico Fellini: *Nights at the Circus* (1984)”. Interestingly enough, Peach asserts that Carter has been an ardent admirer of the Italian film maker Federico Fellini. Accordingly, she discusses some of Fellini’s films and argues that Carter’s carnivalesque view has been influenced by these films. Peach focuses on circus and traces Carter’s use of it to Fellini’s unstinted use of circus in his films. In the theatricality of *Nights at the Circus*, too, she discerns the impact of Fellini’s films. In another article, “Fantasy and Carnivalisation in Angela Carter’s ‘*Nights at the Circus*’”, Magali Cornier Micheal’s thrust is, however, on the element of fantasy. In his view, the element of fantasy pervades the novel, and it is by virtue of this element that the novel acquires its carnivalesque character. He also compares *Nights at the Circus* with D. Juna Barnes’s *Nightwood* and Virginia Woolfe’s *Orlando* both of which employ elements of fantasy. Cornier’s perspective on the carnivalesque element, as he sees it in Carter’s novel, is largely at variance with the varied elements of the carnivalesque as expounded by Bakhtin.

Chapter I

World Inside Out

Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnavalesque

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), the reputed Russian philosopher and literary critic, had his life and career shaped in the turbulent times of Stalinist Russia. Bakhtin, Simon Denith writes:

Lived through the Revolution, the Civil War that followed it, the excitements of the 1920s, the imposition of Stalinism, the purges of the 1930s, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the cultural freeze of the Cold War, the Khrushchev thaw, and the stagnation of the Brezhnev years. Bakhtin's writings were profoundly affected by this extraordinary history, not least because they could not be published between 1929 and the 1960s. (4)

Bakhtin's critics and readers have been fascinated by the variety of subjects, ideas, and vocabularies embodied in his works. Some of his insights have been highly controversial and groundbreaking. His biographers, Catherina Clark and Michael Holquist, have pointed out the different influences and phases in his evolution as a thinker. Bakhtin had been influenced by Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, roughly between 1919 and 1924. Between

1925 and 1929, he was interested in intellectual movements such as Freudianism, Marxism, Formalism, linguistics and physiology. During the 1930s, he was concerned with genres and narratology, particularly the novel and its history. During the 1960s and 70s, “he returned to metaphysics from the new perspective of social theory and philosophy of language”(Clark and Holquist 3). It is, therefore, small wonder that his works have tended to be erudite, innovative, and multidimensional.

Some of his early works, which appeared in the 1920s, were published under the names of his friends, Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev and Voloshinov. This was, perhaps, Bakhtin’s strategy to evade censorship, exile, or execution during the vigilant days of Stalinist administration. Nevertheless, it turned Bakhtin into a subject of fervent disputes about their authorship. Though there was no convincing evidence to prove the authorship of the texts, many critics found reasons enough to conclude that they had actually been written by Bakhtin. Of these works, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1986) published under the name of Voloshinov, showed an unmistakable commitment to Marxism. As a result, it became a crucial text for many Marxist theoreticians who promptly banked on Bakhtin’s ideas to develop their own theories. Contemporary critics like Graham Pechey, Peter Stallybrass, Allon White, Ken Hirschkop, David Shepherd, and David Patterson look upon Bakhtin primarily as a thinker who has been influenced by Marxist theories. Pechey says that Bakhtin’s “thinking is very closely akin

to the independent tradition of Western Marxism and at odds with the Soviet Marxism dominant in his time” (310).

Bakhtin was fully aware of the fact that it was impossible for him to have his works published in Stalin’s Russia. But, he was a man of robust optimism, an optimism well reflected in the statements he has made in his well-known book, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1972): “ Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (116). True to his fears, even this book, written in 1929, did not find favour with Stalin’s government and was immediately suppressed. He was arrested in the same year for his association with an unofficial group of scholars who were attempting to reconcile the theology and the intellectual ideas of their day. He was sentenced to five years of exile in Kazakisthan. Anti-Soviet conspiracy and corrupting young minds with his ideas were the twin charges brought against him. But, Bakhtin persisted with his liberal and positive outlook and wrote, during the 1930s, his dissertation *Rabelais and His World*. It became a politically controversial work, particularly because of its celebration of the lower-bodily stratum. Consequently, it remained unpublished for about twenty-five years. But, with its publication in the West in 1965, his reputation as a serious thinker was well-established. Another major work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, appeared in 1975. *Toward a Philosophy of Act*, which Bakhtin

had actually written in the 1920s, had to wait nearly six decades since its posthumous publication, in Russia, in 1986. In every one of his works, there was something new. The 1970s and 80s witnessed a phenomenal growth in western interest in Bakhtin's works. Accordingly, they began to be intensively studied and enthusiastically translated from Russian into a variety of other languages including English. Bakhtin had emerged as a great writer and theoretician for good.

Bakhtin has contributed several fascinating concepts to literary theory. The concept of the carnivalesque is one of them. Very few concepts have in recent times attracted so much of attention as the concept of the carnivalesque which derives from his book, *Rabelais and His World*. Originally his Ph.D. dissertation, this book is Bakhtin's painstaking study of the stories, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, by the 16th century French Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais. The carnivalesque, as Bakhtin sees it, is basically a literary mode capable of subverting dominant discourses. The twin tools primarily used to this end are humour and laughter. Bakhtin traces the carnivalesque to the carnival culture of medieval times. Considered vulgar and non-literary, Rabelais' works had for long remained rather neglected. It was Bakhtin who, through a close reading, showed them to be serious and vivacious works deeply anchored in medieval European folk culture. Bakhtin's purpose in *Rabelais and His World* is to bring out the revolutionary potential of carnivalesque literature and of the language and imagery associated with the

carnival milieu. Bakhtin hails Rabelais as an inveterate exponent of the carnivalesque literary mode. He observes: “The greatest writer to complete the cycle of the people’s carnival laughter and bring it into world literature was Rabelais” (*Rabelais* 12). Bakhtin uses Rabelais as a springboard for examining the cardinal features of the carnivalesque and the inalienable relationship between carnival, human life, and literature. In the hands of Bakhtin, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, become greatly delightful artifacts larded with the festive forms of late medieval and early Renaissance folk culture. It was this culture around him that had, to a large extent, determined Rabelais’ artistic outlook and his world view. It is this popular character of his works that has been largely responsible for their alleged non-literariness and their consequent relegation to the background over the centuries. In terms of his language and imagery Rabelais was a non-conformist. For, they were clearly out of tune with the officially sanctioned literary norms and canons of his age.

Carnival, as Bakhtin considers it, is a complex cultural phenomenon. It has considerable socio-political significations. In the past, carnival was, for people, an annual occasion of unbridled merriment. They always longed for it and found in it a source of profound respite from day-to-day monotonies. But, the Bakhtinian carnival is much more than mere fun and frolic. In his conception, carnival is, at bottom, revolution; it is unbarred expression, mirroring a general sense of the world; it is a style of life and language that

transcends, and tampers with, all officially taught behavioural patterns. In a sense, its world is akin to the amoral world of the well-known Restoration comedy of manners. A world on its own, it has a code of its own. In his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin says:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts there is no other idea outside it. During carnival time life is subjected 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. (7)

What is underlined here is the populist nature of the carnival. Carnival is bound by one principle alone, the principle of freedom and indulgence. Its spirit is not local but universal. It informs all cultures.

Carnival is vehemently opposed to officialdom. It suspends all forms of hierarchy. In this context, Bakhtin's contrast between the "official feast" and the "carnival feast" (*Rabelais* 10) is noteworthy. The carnival feast is the true feast of time. It is the feast of becoming, of change and renewal. Unlike this, the official feast affirms and reinforces the existing hierarchy and the conventional religious, political, and moral values and taboos. During the carnival time, people enter a world of freedom, equality, and plenty. On the

contrary, during the official feast social ranks and inequalities remain intact, and the regulations of hierarchy are strictly observed. The official feast does not knit people together on an egalitarian basis; the carnival feast does. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque involves an inversion of cultural hierarchy, too. It does not demarcate high and low in the cultural sphere. Through its renunciation of dominant ideological perceptions and its free, fearless, and festive lifestyle, it casts a skeptical and revisionary glance at the status quo. It, thus, becomes a site of death and rebirth, death of the old and birth of the new. In Bakhtin's view, the carnivalesque operates not through ironic inversion alone; it operates experimentally, innovatively, and creatively, too.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the major features of the carnivalesque. One of them is laughter. Derived predominantly from medieval folk humour, carnival laughter is festive laughter. However, it has certain other sources, too. The Hippocratean vision of Democritus' mad laughter, the Aristotelian notion that laughter is peculiar to human beings, Lucian's views on Menippea's laughter from the "kingdom of the dead" (*Rabelais* 69) and the Roman Saturnalian model of laughter are some of them. Ancient parodic literature and locally celebrated festivals such as "the feast of fools" (*Rabelais* 75) and the "feast of ass" (*Rabelais* 78) which parodied church rituals have also influenced the evolution of carnivalesque laughter. It may be noted that "carnivalesque laughter is not an individual reaction to a comic event; it is collective laughter, the laughter of all people, including its participants"

(*Rabelais* 78). It serves a transgressive and degrading function and has a universal significance. It destroys the fear of the do's and don'ts of officialdom and holds within it the power to bring about change. Nevertheless, it has about it a certain amount of ambivalence, too. According to Bakhtin, it both buries and revives. Carnival laughter is a shade different from laughter in a satire. In a satire, the satirist remains detached and his laughter is a private, individual response to the satirized object; it is not directed at himself. "Carnival laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world" (*Rabelais* 89). The satirist also becomes the butt of the jokes.

The grotesque body is another important feature of the carnivalesque. The principle central to it is degradation, the lowering and belittling of what is generally considered to be sacred, high, or noble. The grotesque is, indeed, a mode or technique and it uses the material body to represent the world. In literature, it challenges the notion of the canon. For Bakhtin, it represents the human body as a multiple, incomplete, and imperfect entity, always in the process of becoming. Mobile, hybrid, disproportionate, obscene, and de-centered, it outgrows all limits. Besides, it emphasizes bodily openings and orifices like the nostrils, mouth, anus, and also the lower parts like the belly, legs, feet, buttocks, and genitals. The grotesque also comprehends the ageing body and the sick body. It can also serve as a resource for purposes of reversal and parodic exaggeration. In Bakhtin's view, it is a celebration of the cycle of

life and is linked to birth and renewal, to decay and death. It also problematizes the norms and boundaries, beliefs and behavioural patterns conventionally associated with the human body. Tihanov, the noted Bakhtin scholar, rightly comments:

The grotesque becomes, for Bakhtin, a vantage point from which a different conception of the human arises, a humanism that is no longer bound to a belief in the individual and is no longer underpinned by an embrace and promotion of the virtues of measure, proportion, or reason. It is a humanism that manages to incorporate and process “the darker side” of humanity and the sometimes aggressive and unpredictable mode of action that carnival poses. The grotesque, in other words, sponsors in Bakhtin a different kind of humanism. (16)

Tihanov says that one of the main reasons behind Bakhtin’s “longevity on the intellectual scene” (17) is his humanistic perception of the grotesque, which disrupts and de-centers all dominant constructions of the body. It may not be presumptuous to suggest here that it is this kind of a humanism that informs Kamala Surayya’s view of the hermaphrodites in her poem “Dance of the Eunuchs.”

No discussion of the carnivalesque can overlook marketplace language which constitutes a cardinal aspect of it. Of the popular non-official spaces,

where carnival, as Bakhtin sees it, is situated, the marketplace is the most prominent. It is on this venue that the various genres of the billingsgate find their exciting expression. Marketplace language comprises laughter, folk humour, comic spectacle, oral and written parody, insult, abuse, obscenity, and blasphemy. Debasing bodily gestures such as spitting, “tossing of excrement” (*Rabelais* 148), and “drenching in urine” (*Rabelais* 149) are also interesting elements of it. These gestures, which stem from the grotesque body, were part and parcel of the rituals and festivities associated with the medieval charivari and the feast of fools. Bakhtin considers them to be instances of the verbal and scatological liberties which characterized popular behaviour during carnivals. Marketplace images are “deeply ambivalent, being intimately related to life-death-birth. This is why such images are devoid of cynicism and coarseness in our sense of the words” (*Rabelais* 149). On the one hand, these images disrupt the accepted norms of language and body language. On the other, they also revive and renew them. Profanities and abuses were held to be indecorous. Such speech was, therefore, excluded from the sphere of official speech and behavior and relegated to the realm of the folk marketplace. The marketplace, which Bakhtin significantly calls a “territory”, made up “a peculiar world within the official medieval world order and was ruled by a special type of relationship” (*Rabelais* 154). Bakhtin’s comments on its language are also worth noting here:

Officially the palaces, churches, institutions, and private homes were dominated by hierarchy and etiquette, but in the marketplace a special kind of language was heard, almost a language of its own, quite unlike the language of the church, palace, courts, and institutions. (*Gargantua and Pantagruel* 154)

The marketplace, thus, becomes a space where the officially tabooed speech is preserved as the idiom of the plebeians. The culture enacted there is of a type that counters official culture. The speech and conduct of the marketplace are marked by the spirit of laughter thrown up by the carnival. Ivanov observes that “carnival language proves to be a means of connecting the lower levels of inner speech with the broader social sphere” (12).

The lower bodily stratum is an indispensable element of the carnivalesque. It embodies a revolutionary and transgressive force and, obviously, serves as an important source for celebrating the material body. This celebration, however, entails a relook at the sacred or the exalted. Bakhtin says: “All that is sacred or exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum” (*Rabelais* 395). It degrades its objects by collapsing them to the “bodily grave” (*Rabelais* 375). Bowels, belly, genital organs, birth, death, and sexual acts are the main constituent elements of the lower bodily stratum. Interestingly enough, the lower bodily stratum has a

topographical significance, too. Bakhtin associates its elements with the bowels of the earth, the underworld, the realm of the dead, and also with Hell. He sees in the journeys of Rabelais' Pantagruel a carnivalization of even the underworld. Accordingly, in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the subterranean regions assume a carnivalesque dimension. In medieval Neo-platonic and Christian cosmology, the universe had a hierarchically ordered kinetic system, with a movement upward into heaven and a movement downward into hell or the underworld. Bakhtin observes:

All metaphors of movement in medieval thought and art have this sharply defined, surprisingly consistent vertical character. All that was best was highest, all that was worst was lowest. The horizontal line of movement, forward and backward, is absent. (*Rabelais* 401)

This idea of a vertically “graded cosmos, divided into higher and lower worlds” (*Rabelais* 401) is disrupted by Bakhtin. He contests the association of the lower with what is undesirable and of the higher with what is desirable. Accordingly, the lower bodily stratum, which erodes power structures and erases age-old demarcation lines, symbolizes, for him, “horizontal line of movement” and “historical progression” (*Rabelais* 427). Clark and Holquist rightly observe: “At a time when everyone was told to look ‘higher’ and deny the body and its dictates, Bakhtin extolled the virtues of the everyday and

advocated reveling in the basic functions of what he called the ‘lower bodily stratum’” (*Rabelais* 312).

Popular festive imagery is central to the carnivalesque. Beating, blowing, thrashing, chasing, dismembering, slaughtering, bloodshed, joking, and clowning are some of it. Nicknames, masks, travesties, disguises, games, songs, battles and fights, fortune telling, fire, burning, drowning, kitchen utensils, church bells and cowbells are also part of it. Images of birth and death, parodies of church and wedding rituals, are also aspects of the festive paraphernalia. In carnivals, the presence of these elements not only adds to the general sportive ambience, but also brings “a sense of unity to the people” (*Rabelais* 202). In literary works, the use of festive imagery renders them carnivalesque. Bakhtin has noted Rabelais’ unstinted use of such imagery as a narrative technique to produce laughter, to subvert “old truths” (*Rabelais* 400) and “gloomy seriousness” (*Rabelais* 426), and to uncrown their stubborn representatives whom he calls “agelasts” and “catchpoles” (*Rabelais* 205). Richard. M. Berrong rightly points out that folk cultural forms are, for Bakhtin, signifiers of “instability and change, a dynamism that moves ever forward to the new. They are associated with a mockery of serious single-minded dogma, pompous officialdom. They are the incarnation of the spirit of permanent revolution” (107).

Banquet imagery also imparts a delightful dimension to the carnivalesque. To Bakhtin, “food, drink, swallowing” (*Rabelais* 279) are not

sheer elements of folk festivities; in the context of the grotesque body, they have a special significance, too. Eating and drinking excesses invariably create occasions of fun and laughter. “Feasting is part of folk merriment. Not a single comic scene can do without it” (*Rabelais* 279). A banquet is not sumptuous eating alone; it is a symbolic act, too. Bakhtin comments:

The popular-festive banquet has nothing in common with static private life and individual well-being. The popular images of food and drink are active and triumphant, for they conclude the process of labor and struggle of the social man against the world. They express the people as a whole because they are based on the inexhaustible, ever-growing abundance of the material principle. They are universal and organically combined with the concept of the free and sober truth, ignoring fear and piousness and therefore linked with wise speech. Finally, they are infused with gay time, moving toward a better future that changes and renews everything in its path (*Rabelais* 302).

The carnival feast is a collective event, not a private, individual one. It is an expression of the social man with his achievements and adversities, his love of freedom and laughter, and his longing for a still better future. Feasting provides a “gay time” (*Rabelais* 302) for people to engage in free and frank communication, ignoring all proprieties of language use. In his essay, “Food,

bodies and Etiquette”, Bob Ashley says that Bakhtin’s culinary ideas are relevant to the study of food culture. Ashley finds, in Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais, a valuable “account of the relationship between food, bodies and etiquette” (41). He adds that Bakhtin’s scrutiny of Rabelais’ banquet imagery “revolves around a distinction between the popular festive tradition of the carnivalesque banquet, and the more restricted, less exuberant practices of the bourgeois feast” (42). Carnival feast flouts all forms of official table manners. In carnivalesque literary texts, banquet imagery can also function as a strategy to mock the politics of food. The traditional association of excessive eating with evil figures like cannibals and vampires has resulted in constructing a negative attitude toward it. Interrogating this officially generated construct and the general failure to see the real significance of excessive eating, Fabio Paracecoli writes in his, “Tasty Utopias”:

...when talking about cannibals and vampires, the desire for excessive eating and ingestion is often overlooked or even repressed by culture and society....It is almost as if we were scared of facing our own unruly appetites, so we project them outside onto evil characters that deserve to be despised, fought and destroyed. (61)

It may be useful to recall here the figure of Ravana’s brother Kumbhakarna in our Indian epic *Ramayana*. Contrary to this negative perception, excessive

eating assumes a positive meaning in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, because Bakhtin views it as a celebration of the body and its appetites. At the same time, the custodians of authority, who always threaten and destroy the carnivalesque body in the name of order and discipline, are mocked and degraded, in literary texts, as monstrous gluttons. This is strategic inversion, creating them in the image of the evil and contemptuous, excessive eater, an image they themselves have constructed and used as an instrument of control. The banquet imagery, thus, has a double function in carnivalesque literature.

In short, the carnivalesque, as Bakhtin conceives of it, features a weird world. It is as he variously calls it “a world upside down” (*Rabelais* 426), a “world inside-out” (*Rabelais* 11), a world where the bottom is up. It is a heterogeneous world where all is mixed, hybrid, degraded, and defiled. It includes fairs, popular feasts, processions, comic shows, mummery, dance, open-air amusement, spectacles, costumes, masks, giants, dwarfs, monsters, trained animals. Parodies, travesties, vulgar farce, and various genres of billingsgate such as curses, oaths, slang, popular tricks, jokes, and scatological forms are also characteristic of it.

In his *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin regards the novel as a peculiarly important genre of writing. For him, “the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (3). It celebrates linguistic and thematic variety and acts as a subversive force, a catalyst opening into,

and intervening in, ongoing cultural and political history. Since it has the capacity for self-criticism, it is, according to Bakhtin, an ever evolving phenomenon. Parodic inversion of “canonised genres and styles”

(*Dialogic 7*) is also one of its notable traits. Bakhtin writes:

The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them. (*Dialogic 7*)

The language of the novel renews itself by incorporating such “extra-literary” (*Dialogic 236*) features as dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony which make it open-ended. For Bakhtin, this type of novel is best exemplified by Rabelais, Dostoevsky, and Cervantes. Postmodern fiction also makes use of these subversive techniques, particularly parody. Linda Hutcheon sees postmodern parody as a revision and re-reading of the past, as a process which both confirms and subverts the history’s power of representation.

The concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, which Bakhtin discusses in his *Dialogic Imagination*, also contribute to his theory of the carnivalesque. A Dialogic text, he argues, constantly engages with, and is informed by, other voices, works, and genres. Dialogism foregrounds the unofficial forms of everyday speech. A Dialogic expression is a “double voice” (*Dialogic 261*)

which resists the fixity and closure and a Dialogic novel is an infinite dialogue among a diversity of emerging perspectives. All these varied voices, however, have an equal status and avoid authorial finality. This kind of communication is what Bakhtin calls “dialogic contract” (*Dialogic* 262). Every utterance is socio-historically specific. As such, every dialogic interaction, Bakhtin suggests, has ideological ramifications. Since each speaker represents a different perspective, the interaction invariably unveils the structures of power and involves a conflict over their motives and meaning. Bakhtin views human society and its speech as inherently dialogic and open-ended. Dialogism is against all forms of monologic discourse. In literature, the concepts of canon and authorial voice are monologic. In life, institutions like the state, judiciary, and religion are emblems of monologism. Disrupting monologic authority, dialogism brings together the voices of all individual characters who may belong to different cultures, classes, or communities. In fact, monologism involves what Marcuse, who is critical of the monologic proclivity of capitalism and totalitarianism, calls “one-dimensional thought” (128) in his book *One Dimensional Man* (1964). He considers this type of thought to be unhealthy to the individual. Through a variety of mechanisms, it demands closure and conformity and blocks and represses the faculties of imagination and critical thinking.

Heteroglossia denotes the complex stratification of language into genre, register, dialect, and sociolect. For Bakhtin, it is not simply a

sociolinguistic process, but a crucially active aspect of the novel and its language. Dialogic interaction occurs in a heteroglossic context. In a literary text, heteroglossia appears through the characters' parleys which reproduce a culture's varied languages and dialects. Bakhtin views heteroglossia "both as social languages within a single national language and as different national languages within the same culture" (*Dialogic* 275). It is the way these languages operate, act and react upon each other, that makes a text dialogically heteroglossic. Interestingly enough, "heteroglossia may even conflict with the author's or any surrounding languages which may not appear in the text" (*Dialogic* 275).

Bakhtin discusses his concept of polyphony in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Polyphony is the Greek word for 'many voices.' The term is often seen as synonymous with dialogism and heteroglossia. It refers to the independent but interconnected voices of the characters, and also of the narrator, in a text. Bakhtin finds in Dostoevsky's works excellent examples of polyphonic texts which have an unmistakably democratic and egalitarian tone about them. Bakhtin writes that the "polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through..." (*Problems* 40). Polyphony is primarily a formal aspect of the text. It comprehends and subsumes the dialogic. Its importance also lies in its function as an auxiliary to the making of distinctive chronotopes in a text. The Russian writer Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), as the

very title indicates, is a novel that puts polyphony and its concomitant chronotope to remarkable use.

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope has also received wide critical attention. Introducing it in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" included in *Dialogic Imagination*, he says that etymologically the word comes from the Greek 'chronos', meaning 'time' and 'topos', meaning 'space.'(180) Chronotope refers to the alignment of time and space in a literary work, to the temporal and spatial dimensions through which a text's events and its aftermath unfold. Chronotopes, as Bakhtin points out, can tell us how "real historical time and space" and "actual historical persons" (*Dialogic* 180) are reckoned with in a specific genre. It also shows how fictional time, space, and character are interlocked. Sue Vice writes:

The Chronotope operates on three level: first, as the means by which a text represents history; second, as the relation between images of time and space in the novel, out of which any representation of history must be constructed; and third, as a way of formal properties of the text itself, its plot, narrator, and relation to other texts. (205)

Bakhtin's interest in the images of the marketplace, public square, streets, roads, taverns, bridges, gutters, corridors, bathhouses, decks of ships, and

bridges, images, which recur in the works of Rabelais and Dostoyevsky, may be attributed to his idea of the chronotope. Spaces are signifiers of time, too.

Many critics have drawn inspiration from Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and used it to further their ideas in their respective fields of study. For instance, those who are not favourably disposed toward the idea of the canon can find in the insights of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque sufficient supportive logic. Canon implies authority and timelessness. Being opposed to authority and crowning, the carnivalesque subverts and rejects it. Terry Eagleton's views on the concept of literary canon may be noted in this context. In his essay, "Literature and the Rise of English", he argues that canon is a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a particular time. He suggests a revision of our notions of history and canon. In a sense, this revisionary stance is what lies at the core of the carnivalesque, too.

The spread of cultural studies as an academic discipline has led to a rise in discussions on the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Carnival has always had its roots in popular culture. Within western thought, culture has, over the centuries, been constructed as a hierarchical concept, resulting in the formation of categories such as high or genuine and low, elitist and popular. To Mathew Arnold, the most formidable threat to high culture came from the Industrial Revolution. In his book, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), he argued

that the advent of mechanical reproduction and mass culture was plunging European society into cultural anarchy, into philistinism. F. R. Leavis, in his widely influential work, *The Great Tradition* (1948), identified certain authors as canons and saw their works as expressions of genuine culture, thereby distinguishing high and genuine from low and popular forms of culture. A similar critique of mass popular culture was mounted by the critics of the Frankfurt school, too. In their view, this culture was of an inferior order, playing havoc with the aura, value, and uniqueness of genuine cultural artifacts and promoting an unthinking acceptance of capitalist consumerism. In the overall context of this negative vision of popular culture, Bakhtin's approach to it, as embodied in his carnivalesque theory, is of paramount importance. Bakhtin does not seem to approve of the division of culture into high and low, into canonical and non-canonical. The carnivalesque implies that no society can claim a homogenous, monolithic culture. In fact, culture has to be perceived in terms of its plurality of voices and values. Cultural plurality and eclecticism, it may be noted, is a conspicuous character of the contemporary world in which globalization, trans-national migration, and technological advancement are causing shifts in human attitudes to life and bringing societies closer to each other. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque has become a far more relevant theoretical apparatus for assessing the contending forces of the high and the low, in the contemporary world's cultural scenario. John Docker, in the concluding chapter, significantly entitled "Carnival and

Contemporary Popular Culture”, of his book *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (1994), points out the prominent presence of the carnivalesque in contemporary culture and draws particular attention to its intense subversive nature. In his view, popular television insistently engages in inversion. His emphatic observation that “such inversion could be compared not directly to carnival but to carnivalesque as a cultural, philosophical and cosmological mode, present obviously in carnival...” (276) is of especial note here. He cites the popular comic *Tom and Jerry* and the famous American sitcom *Married... With Children* as striking examples of the carnivalesque. In *Married...With Children* laughter is generated through mockery of husbands and through depictions of disorderly women who through word and deed indulge in gender reversals. Docker also sees a close affinity between Bakhtin’s vision of carnival games and the vision informing the enormous carnivalization of sports and games in our contemporary popular culture. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin says: “The images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historical process: fortune, misfortune, gain and loss, crowning and uncrowning. Life was presented as a miniature play...” (270).

Bakhtin is largely silent on the gender question. His focus has been on male writers. In his essay, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” Wayne Booth underlines the importance of Bakhtin’s ideas on the novelistic genre. At the same time, he castigates

Bakhtin for excluding gender issues and women's works from his study of the novel. This may be a lacuna, but, nevertheless, it does not detract from the value of his theoretical insights. On close scrutiny, his views can be found to have serious and greatly useful implications for even feminism. Like Bakhtin, feminists, too, are opposed to the ideas of canon, authority, and officialdom. Some feminist critics have been considerably attracted by Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and also by his concept of the grotesque body which celebrates the pregnant female body, the birth-giving womb, the open and leaky body, and also the ageing body as symbols of change and renewal. In Bakhtin's conception, the womb is not just a biological entity; it is a cultural entity, too. Bakhtin's views can help feminist critics better understand male discourses and the operation of gender politics in life and literature.

Feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Dale Bauer, Mary Russo, and Nancy Glazener are aware of the efficacy of Bakhtinian ideas in throwing light on a variety of feminist concerns such as power relations, body politics, female hysteria, and social and cultural marginalization. In her essay, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Julia Kristeva, for instance, identifies Bakhtin's dialogism with intertextuality, a term she is credited with for inventing and popularising. To her, both dialogic and polyphonic texts "disapprove of the very structures of official thought founded on formal logic"(85). In dialogism, she sees a useful concept by which feminist writers can subvert the canon, and also the politics of gender rampant in the realms of language and

the body. She also thinks that the socio-political meanings that underpin a text can be better gauged through its dialogic texture. Dialogism can also help foreground what is deemed to be linguistically and culturally marginal. Pointing up the strengths of the carnivalesque, she says: “Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest”(65). Kristeva’s recognition of the spirit of protest and transgression underlying the Bakhtinian carnivalesque implies an acknowledgement of a certain amount of affinity in terms of style, language, tone, and spirit between carnivalesque writing and women’s writing or what has been called ‘*Écriture féminine*.’ Dale Bauer in her book, *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community* (1988), argues that the works of female writers like Kate Chopin and Wharton can be read from a Dialogic angle. She writes:

At the heart of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic model of discourse is the notion that we engage in simultaneous cultural and personal dialogues. If a novel is a kind of dialogue, as Bakhtin has argued about Dostoevsky’s novels in particular, then Chopin’s novels call upon us to take part in this orchestrated conversation. (131)

It is also worth noting that Nancy Glazener sees a close connection between the carnivalesque and the ‘*feminine*.’ In her article “Dialogic Subversion:

Bakhtin, the novel and Gertrude Stein”, she identifies both the feminine and the carnivalesque as subversive forces. She also suggests that Bakhtin’s notions of the body can enable a better understanding of the meaning of the term ‘feminine.’ The influence of Bakhtin’s grotesque can be seen in Mary Russo’s concept of the female grotesque as developed in her book, *The Female Grotesques: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995). Her comments on the carnivalesque are particularly noteworthy:

The carnivalesque...has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system. Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory, the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique from some archimedean point of authority without, to models of transformation and counter-production situated within the social system and symbolically at its margin. (54)

Postmodernism and the carnivalesque share certain common features. The carnivalesque is anti-authoritarian; it subverts binaries. It rejects absolutism and advocates relativism. This is true of postmodernism, too. David Carroll, in his essay, “Narrative, Heterogeneity, and the Question of the

Political: Bakhtin and Lyotard”, finds remarkable similarities between Bakhtin and Lyotard:

Bakhtin’s approach to narrative, like Lyotard’s could be considered a pragmatics and defended on grounds similar to those proposed by Lyotard.... For Bakhtin, in the novel, no voice, no language, no narrative ever goes unanswered; none is presented as having the first or last word.... The novel displays openly its origins in heterogeneity and multilingualness.... One senses in Lyotard’s work the same kind of emphasis on the openness, the “plasticity,” the inherent heterogeneity not just of the novel but of all narrative. For Lyotard too, narrative distinguishes itself from other genres by admitting all genres into itself. (79)

Postmodern critics Featherstone and Brian McHale have also seen affinities between the carnivalesque and the postmodern. McHale is of the view that postmodern writing and its textual heterogeneity reflect carnival hybridity. Subversion through parody is also both a carnivalesque and postmodern strategy. McHale cites the examples of Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs and Salman Rushdie, whose works are replete with feasting, defecating, and copulating bodies, as exponents of postmodern carnivals. He also argues that

postmodern fiction is an attempt to recapture the carnivalesque in the twentieth century. He observes in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (2003):

Postmodernist fiction compensates for the loss of the carnival context by incorporating carnival, or some surrogate for carnival, at the level of its projected world. In the absence of a *real* carnival context, it constructs fictional carnivals.... Inevitably, Postmodernist representations of carnival often take the form of some...version of carnival such as Bakhtin describes. (174)

Besides, he sees in circuses, fairs, sideshows, and amusement parks as represented in postmodern fictional texts ‘indicators of the carnival context (174).’

The carnivalesque spirit permeates society, culture, and literature. The writer who fully and most powerfully represents this spirit, according to Bakhtin, is Francois Rabelais. The soul of his works *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* is laughter, which stems from his remarkable use of the carnivalesque mode of narration. Carnivalesque fiction is also characterized by a commingling of humans and animals. In this respect, the popular Harry Potter stories are profoundly carnivalesque. Critics like Micheal Gardiner, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have critiqued Bakhtin’s utopian vision as reflected in his mapping of the revolutionary potential of the carnivalesque.

Michael Holquist, however, is of a different view altogether. In his preface to *Rabelais and His World* he unequivocally states: “Bakhtin’s carnival....is revolution itself” (xviii).

Chapter II

A Jewish Joke

Philip Roth (1933-2018) is one of the most prominent novelists of twentieth century America. A prolific writer, he has to his credit 31 books, which comprise novels, memoirs, essays, and short stories, written during an illustrious career that spanned almost 60 years. Throughout this period, he was seriously, and often critically, too, concerned with topics like the American Jewish diaspora, anti-Semitism, Anne Frank and her startling survival of the Holocaust, the election of President L. B. Johnson, Zionism and Israel-Palestinian conflict. Literature in itself has also been one of his major preoccupations. This is amply evident in the intertextuality that pervades his fictional as well as other works. Exploiting the potential of postmodern and metafiction narrative strategies, he constantly evokes, in his works, great writers like Henry James, Flaubert, Kafka, Gogol, Chekhov, Kundera, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Melville, Hawthorne, Conrad, Bellow, and Malamud. Roth's fiction is fraught with humour, inventiveness, and stylistic idiosyncrasies. A number of his protagonists emerge as shockingly funny rebels and transgressors. Roth uses them to serve a variety of purposes like exploring the profound possibilities and potentials of language. It is to this linguistic end that he sometimes makes them burst into wild, unruly, impassioned diatribes and verbal outpouring. In his fulminating humour can

be discerned a telling fusion of comedy and tragedy, rage and love, indignation and entertainment. This can be seen in his depiction of his anti-heroes whose monologues quite often turn out to be comic performances unravelling their selves and life experiences.

The Twentieth century America, particularly the America of the second half of the Twentieth century, witnessed a number of massive cultural and political shifts. Roth was deeply aware of them and promptly addressed them in his works. The Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam and Korean Wars, the Mc Carthy Era and McCarthyism, the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, the Sexual Revolution and the Civil rights movements of the 1960s, the Nixon's Administration and its alleged corruption, the political repression of Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, the rise of conservatism in the 1980s, the political correctness of the 1990s, the Lewinsky Scandal and the War on Terror, political terrorism, Watergate, identity politics, multiculturalism, the Bush years and 9/11, and the prejudice and assimilation of Jewish-Americans into mainstream American society have all been food for Rothian reflections. Such events were, to Roth, matters of great magnitude and consequence and had to be seriously reckoned with. For, they would invariably affect and impact on the personal lives of multitudes of Americans belonging to various cultures and ethnicities. He was not interested in politics as such; he was interested in it in so far as it was a force acting upon human beings, shaping and changing

them, making or marring them. He has boldly cast his ironic and satiric eye on the hypocrisy of American liberalism and democracy and America's political madness. He has sagaciously explored the tension between America's aspiration for perfection and its limitations. Individual freedom, human and gender equality, racism, cultural tolerance, sexuality, political extremism, and fanaticism have also been concerns of great interest to Roth. It is, therefore, small surprise if they figure prominently, sometimes repeatedly, in his works, particularly his novels.

Philip Milton Roth was born in 1933 to a first generation Jewish family, in Newark, New Jersey. His grandparents were immigrants from Poland and Ukraine. Newark was in those days mostly populated by striving Jewish immigrants living a rather conservative life in accord with the dictates of their religion. It was in this Jewish community and Jewish religious and cultural ambience that Roth grew up in the thirties and forties. He attended a Jewish school, loved playing baseball, and listened to radio, like a typical Jewish child. Ironically enough, he tended, in his teenage, to be sceptical of his ancestral culture. As such, he started interrogating his Jewish identity and refused to go to the synagogue. A rebel, he loved to be a fully assimilated American Jew, to be an American in all respects. It was, however, not an easy process. His recalcitrance infuriated both his family and his community. It is this personal experience that has been the motive force behind Roth's treatment, in some of his novels, of the dilemmas and agonies of Jewish

acculturation and assimilation into American society and culture. Newark, it is interesting to note, has been a major inspiration for some of his works. Roth's representation of Newark's Jewish-American diaspora and its experience is realistic. It may have a touch of the provincial about it; it is, nevertheless, remarkable in its vivid passionate evocation of Newark both as a lively town with all its familiar urban trappings and also as a window providing interesting vignettes of the general American life and culture around it.

Roth received his MA in English Language and Literature from University of Chicago and worked there briefly as an instructor of Writing Program. Subsequently, he served two years in the United States Army. He started his career as a writer with the publication of his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), which is a collection of short stories. These stories focus on the concerns of the assimilated second and third generation American Jews as they depart from their ethnic enclaves and give up on their traditional Jewish ways in search of a life of a different flavour in the American suburbs. Roth's next work, *Letting Go* was a novel published in 1962. It underlined the social constraints on men and women in the 1950s. Roth married Margaret Martinson in 1959 and they were divorced her in 1963. The separation and the subsequent death of Margaret in a car crash had left their imprints on Roth's consciousness. In fact, some of his female characters like Lucy Nelson in *When She Was Good* (1967) and Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a*

Man (1974) may be said to have been partly inspired by Roth's life and relationship with Martinson. With the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, Roth became very popular as well controversial. The work became both popular and controversial among Jews as well as non-Jews, particularly because of Roth's explicit and unabashed treatment of Judaism and sexuality. Later, in *Our Gang* (1971) and *The Breast* (1972) which is, in fact, a novella, Roth severely criticised the Nixon Administration. The politics of sexuality, which is a prominent and recurring concern in Roth's oeuvre, found a hilarious exploration through the grotesque figure of Professor David Kepesh who appears as the lusty lascivious protagonist of the trilogy, *The Breast* (1972) *The Professor of Desire* (1974) and *The Dying Animal* (2001). *The Great American Novel* (1973), an exhilarating piece of satire, subverts the vaunted idea of American perfectionism as nothing but a myth. Like Portnoy and Kepesh, Nathan Zuckerman is also one of Roth's most memorable creations. It was in *My Life as a Man* (1974) that Nathan Zuckerman makes his first appearance. His presence as protagonist is also seen in the subsequent novels, *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). It is because of his omniscience in these four works that they are often referred to using the appellation, *Zuckerman Bound*. Zuckerman functions as Roth's fictional alter ego and through him Roth critically examines America's socio-cultural and political scenario in some of his works written during the later years of his career, too.

This certainly accounts for the persistence of Zukerman in novels such as, *The Counterlife* (1986), *Operation Shylock* (1993), *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *Exit Ghost* (2007). Roth was not a practising Jew. Nevertheless, the Jewish diasporic backdrop against which Roth grew up and lived in times when American society as a whole was going through radical socio-cultural and even political upheavals is central to a proper understanding of his works. His themes, such as the struggle of his characters caught between the conflicting demands of the mainstream American WASP culture and the Jewish ethnic culture will make sense only when seen against this background and context. Roth, it may be said, has never been flattering in his depictions of the life and ways of American Jews. This largely negative approach to them has even been seen as providing anti-Semites with ample ammunition and vindication.

Along with his fiction, Roth published a considerable number of reviews, essays, autobiographical pieces, and interviews. The majority of his nonfiction has been collected by the author in two volumes, *Reading Myself and Others* (first published in 1975, then expanded in 1985) and *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (2001). There are a number of uncollected pieces of writing, too. The two collections reveal with striking clarity Roth's lifelong preoccupations: the remarkable machinations of American life and the struggle of the artist. He also discusses the significance of place and incidents of history in shaping personal identity. Most of the

essays and interviews collected in *Reading Myself* are written during 1960-1974. Roth's topics are not limited to immigrant Jewish life alone. America's involvement in Vietnam War, the disastrous Presidency of Richard Nixon, feminism, the 1960s youth culture, and his deep admiration for writers like Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera are some of the various other topics addressed by Roth in the collection. He also writes about his own writing process and discusses, in specific terms, the concerns that generated each of his works.

Shop Talk also offers similar insights into Roth's preoccupations. But, the collection is in the form of conversations between himself and some of his colleagues and European contemporaries like Primo Levi, Aharon Appelfeld, Ivan Klima, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Milan Kundera. All of them had right hand experiences of the horrors of totalitarianism. Conducted between 1976 and 2000, these conversations include interviews, correspondences, and personal remembrances. Roth's critical appraisal of Saul Bellow is also part of this collection. With these contemporaries Roth is most concerned with defining the role of the artist given such circumstances. With writers like Edna O'Brien and Mary McCarthy, and Malamud, Roth returns again to the writer's craft and to the importance of place and conditions of history in shaping it.

Roth had a deep interest in Prague culture and literature. He was also an ardent supporter of the dissident writers in Communist Czechoslovakia. In 1972 he visited Prague for the first time and continued to visit the place several times until 1977. These visits introduced him to Czech writers, Czech history, culture, and politics which inspired Roth. He met writers like Ivan Klíma, Milan Kundera, and Václav Havel. Roth took the role of an activist and supported these Czech writers with money and even helped them to get their works published in America. Roth's admiration for these Czech writers never ceased. He dedicated his work *The Ghost Writer* to Milan Kundera. It is a novel which imagines a life for Anne Frank if she were to survive the Holocaust. Besides his trips to Prague, Roth also travelled regularly to Paris, where Milan Kundera had managed to relocate by the early 1980s. He also travelled to Israel and to London. Roth's visit to Israel and its impact on him is reflected in *Portnoy's Complaint*. It is worth remembering that the concluding chapter of *Portnoy's Complaint* is set in Israel.

Roth's fame, and notoriety within the Jewish community, reached its peak with the publication of his 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*. Powerful in terms of language and imagery, the novel has variously been described as satire, farce, parody, and out-and-out pornography. Nevertheless, it has not so far been explored from a Bakhtinian carnivalesque perspective. Combining sheer fun, playfulness, and deadly seriousness, it bravely unveils a world of carnival, a world moored in and mirroring the multi-ethnic and counter-

cultural realities of post-1960 America. This is the world the young Jewish Alexander Portnoy, the novel's protagonist, attempts to navigate. Using the carnivalesque mode to great effect, Roth probes a series of issues such as post-modernity, food and food politics, sex and sexual politics, WASP cultural dominance, immigrant Jewish minority culture, identity politics, cultural assimilation, and alienation. These themes are so knit together as to project the conflict between the Jewish immigrants' life style and the dominant American WASP culture. The carnivalesque narrative mode comes fully alive through the figure of the rebellious Alexander Portnoy, and through the image of his Jewish family and community. In both content and style *Portnoy's Complaint* reflects the carnivalesque.

The novel's pithy prologue is in itself an index of its carnivalesque texture. In the form of a case-note, it describes the patient's neurotic condition as 'Portnoy's complaint' which is defined as 'a disorder in which strongly felt altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature.' Its symptoms are acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism, and oral coitus. Feelings of shame and fear of castration are also significant symptoms. The description, which parodies modern psychoanalytic and medical discourses, is particularly noteworthy, because no one can fail to notice its emphasis on body or grotesque body which, as Bakhtin points out, is one of the major features of the carnivalesque and which is the prime space where the physician plays out

his role. The novel's medical frame with its images of physician, patient, and disease comes close to the use of a similar frame by Rabelais. Bakhtin's views on the image of the physician in the Prologue to the Fourth book of Rabelais' *Pantagruel* are worth mentioning here:

Rabelais physician is unlike the caricature of the professional narrow-minded doctor in the literature of the later period. The Rabelaisan image is complex, universal, and ambivalent; this paradoxical figure is a composite of Hippocrate's noble physician "equal to God" and of the *scatophagus* who devours excrement in antique comedies....The physician is essentially connected with the struggle of life and death in the human body.
(*Rabelais* 179)

Bakhtin also observes that Rabelais looks at the practice of medicine as "a farce with three characters: the patient, the physician and the disease" (*Rabelais*180). The farcical, it may be said, is an invariable ingredient of the carnivalesque. Interestingly enough, the farcical informs the action proper of Roth's novel, as it takes place in the clinic of a psychoanalyst named Dr. Spielvogel. Lying on the analyst's table, Alexander Portnoy makes a clean breast of all his experiences and ailments and of what he considers to be the root cause of it all. In the process, he exposes the complex and arduous nature of the life of the Jewish-American diaspora in the midst of the dominant

American WASP milieu and culture. The WASP- Jewish cultural clash that he experiences consequent on his hectic endeavours to jump the borders of his Jewish heritage is in itself of a carnivalesque nature. For, carnival, as Bakhtin sees it, begins at the border. As such, temporal, spatial, and psychic border clashes are inherent in it.

Portnoy is a thirty-three year old Jewish American who lives in Newark and loves to surmount his ethnic identity and to be a buoyant part of mainstream American life and culture. But, his Jewish upbringing looms large as a formidable barrier before him. Nevertheless, he tries to crash through it, boldly breaking taboos and doing deeds he is forbidden to. Eventually, he ends up on the analyst's table, groaning, moaning, twisting, and indulging in what has been termed his 'verbal diarrhoea'. Like a carnival performer, he creates before his audience, the psychoanalyst, a world inside-out, a world shot through by grotesque realism and weird happenings that provoke laughter. Portnoy's babbling mouth, "the wide-open bodily abyss" (*Rabelais* 317), which Bakhtin considers to be the most important element of the grotesque body, is a significant image throughout the novel. According to Bakhtin, "men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, diseases, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts" (*Rabelais* 319). The novel abounds in such images. The carnival spirit is admirably sustained all through, luring readers to be participants in the collective carnival laughter which requires an open mouth.

The novel carnivalises the Jewish- American family and its inordinate obsession with tradition. Portnoy's family which, besides himself, consists of his father, mother, and sister, is central to the novel. His mother Sophie Portnoy and his father Jake Portnoy, who represent the Jewish-American diaspora, are figures of authority and control. Mocking Jewish prejudices and essentialist views, Roth portrays them in a carnivalesque light, playfully pointing up their physical and attitudinal oddities. It is important that the recalcitrant Portnoy calls his household the "lunatic asylum" (Roth 89).

No other character in the novel is treated so hilariously and grotesquely as Sophie Portnoy. Sophie is a perennially nagging, domineering, ethnocentric, and pious woman. As a child, Portnoy enjoys no privacy, as his mother's panoptic eye is unflinchingly cast on him and on everything in the household. Portnoy exclaims at one point, "What radar on that woman!" (Roth 11). The energy and thoroughness with which she checks everything both surprises and irritates Portnoy. Over-conscious of hygiene, she is always on the lookout for dirt and germ. Besides checking his sums for mistakes, she also checks his socks for holes, his nails, neck, and every seam and crease of his body for dirt. She dredges the furthest recesses of his ears and pours cold peroxide into them to bring to the surface bits and pieces of the yellow wax inside. Supernatural strength, predatory instincts, a death-like demeanour, a congenital sense of Jewish racial superiority, and a pretentious self-righteousness also mark Sophie's personality out. Comparing his school

friend Smolka's mother and his own, Portnoy comments on Sophie's ubiquitous surveillance which is menacing, stealthy and disastrous, and grotesque and comical:

How do I account for Smolka and *his* daring? *He has a mother who works*. Mine, remember, patrols the six rooms of our apartment the way a guerrilla army moves across its own countryside--there is not a single closet or drawer of mine whose contents she hasn't a photographic sense of. (Roth 172-173)

One of the most diverting scenes in the novel is that of Sophie Portnoy feeding her little son Portnoy. Sitting threateningly beside him with a large kitchen-knife she stuffs him with food. Nonetheless, Sophie brandishing the kitchen knife to frighten her boy becomes a festive comic figure. The kitchen knife is evocative of carnival and its marketplace. It may be useful to remember here that Bakhtin has incisively noted the use, by Rabelais, of kitchen utensils for carnivalising the devils in the farcical passion play, the performance of which constitutes an interesting episode in his *Pantagruel*. Bakhtin writes, "Rabelais describes the devils and their costumes and weapons which were actually kitchen utensils" (*Rabelais* 263). This strategy is, indeed, in the medieval European diablerie tradition of depicting the devil as a carnivalesque character. The devil in the diablerie, which is, in fact, a part

of the mystery, is an extra-official and ambivalent figure, “representing the destroying and renewing force of the material bodily lower stratum” (*Rabelais* 266). Bringing the images of food and knife together, Roth underscores the twin aspects, life and death, of the human body. The cop-like, hawk-like, and guerrilla-like, Sophie Portnoy, who lords it over at home and who has a smattering of the devil about her, is a carnivalesque figure. She is a champion of the status-qua inimical to the Dionysian world view. She is, in fact, one of the ‘agelasts’ in the novel. Bakhtin explains that the agelast in Rabelais’ conception is one “who does not know how to laugh and who is hostile to laughter” (*Rabelais* 267). Sophie is very conscious of her predatory and super-vigilant nature. Portnoy recalls that she herself had told him how she used to watch the butcher “like a hawk” (Roth 11) to make sure that he gave her only kosher meat. What Roth mocks and rejects through the figure of Sophie as a nurture-destroyer is the tyrannical and overindulgent mothering jocularly known as ‘momism’, a term that had gained popularity in post-war America subsequent to the publication of Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* in 1942.

Food and consumption are familiar trappings of the Bakhtinian carnival. In tune with this, there is a preponderance of food and eating images in Roth’s novel. On the one hand, they contribute to the carnivalesque in the novel; on the other, viewed thematically, they underscore the paramount importance of food in human life and society. Food is, primarily speaking

sustenance, satisfying a biological need. And, its shortage when, for example, there is a famine can precipitate serious consequences. Analysing the role of disasters in the evolution of European society and culture, Eric Jones comments in his book, *The European Miracle* (1981):

The options, when the monsoon rains and hence the supply of food failed, were mass emigration which took the form of aimless wanderings, cannibalism, suicide or starvation. Voluntary enslavement...often took place when there were some men who had stocks of food left.... (30)

Food can also be a source of festive fun and delight, bringing people together as is exemplified in social feasts and dinners. Nevertheless, food can also split people asunder, breeding prejudice and hostility as is evident in the practice of a specific food culture, with its prescriptions and taboos, of the different religious communities. This food politics, with its negative dimensions, is well brought out through Sophie Portnoy's approach to food and consumption. To her, the ideal food is Talmudic food. Food transgression is anathema to her; it makes her hysterical. Even the food culture of others is enormously disgusting to her. The WASP in America are, in her view, a despicable people. For, they "sink their teeth into whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of earth" (Roth 81). Her denunciation of their food habits may be noted here:

Let them gorge themselves upon anything and everything that moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or *shmutzig* or dumb the creature in question happens to be. Let them eat eels and frogs and pigs and crabs and lobsters; let them eat vulture, let them eat ape-meat and skunk if they like – a diet of abominable creatures well befits a breed of mankind so hopelessly shallow and empty-headed as to drink, to divorce, and to fight with their fists. All they know, these imbecilic eaters of the execrable, is to swagger, to insult, to sneer, and sooner or later to hit. (Roth 81)

As such, Sophie has a series of taboos and instructions about her son's food and his interactions out- of- doors, in the Gentile world. He shouldn't eat lobster; he shouldn't eat pork, he shouldn't eat French fries and hamburgers. For, they represent the WASP culture, the culture of the other. She looks upon WASP food as garbage through and through and she hates Hamburgers as much as she does Hitler. Portnoy mockingly recalls: "*Hamburgers*, she says bitterly just as she might say *Hitler*" (Roth 33). She ascribes her son's frequent illness to his defiant eating of pork, *chazerai*, as she puts it. She is always fearful that her son might desert his ancestral culture and be assimilated into the WASP culture and society.

Lobster is Sophie's *bête noire*. When Portnoy counters her saying that "she too has committed her transgressions" (Roth 91), she explains how she had in her youth eaten lobster dish by mistake and being punished for it with a stiff, inflexible, almost paralysed fingers. Later, she exhorts her son: "There are plenty of good things to eat in the world, Alex, without eating a thing like a lobster and running the risk of having paralysed hands for the rest of your life." (Roth 94).

It may be said that Roth has treated the weighty theme of food and food politics in a carnivalesque fashion. A remarkable feature of the treatment is the projection of Sophie Portnoy with her bulk, her angularities, her preoccupations and tantrums, in a comic light. To the Jewish-American family, food consumption is a highly ritualised and regulated practice conducive to the formation of a proper Jewish subjectivity. As such, mainstream American food, as it militates against this subjectivity, is unsuitable for consumption. Portnoy resentfully comments on his community's dietary parameters: "Can people be so abysmally stupid and live?" (Roth 97). This comment, certainly, embodies Roth's cultural identity politics of which food politics like sartorial politics has, for centuries, been a crucial part, as a phenomenon harmful to peaceful human coexistence.

Portnoy's father, Jake Portnoy, is another outstanding grotesque figure in the novel. Like Sophie he is also filled with the Jewish sense of superiority.

He is, in a sense, a racist, too. An insurance agent who works for “The Most Benevolent Financial Institution in America” (Roth 7), he spoils the quiet of home with his incessant professional anxieties and difficulties. His clients, who are mostly illiterate Negroes and violent Irishmen who live in the impoverished districts vex and tease and deride him. He considers them to be despicably inferior to him. He wouldn’t talk of blacks except by using the term nigger. A glutton, suffering from chronic constipation is obviously a great source of fun and frolic in the novel:

He drank, of course, not whisky like a *goy*, but mineral oil and milk of magnesia; and chewed on Ex-Lax; and ate All- Bran morning and night; and downed mixed dried fruits by the pound bag. He suffered--- from constipation (Roth 5).

The grotesque is made eminently apparent in Jake’s agonised attempts to move his bowels. Humorously enough, defecation, a spontaneous natural process, has become in his case a type of Herculean endeavour. Accordingly, he takes recourse to a couple of strategies to get his bowels moved. One is inserting a suppository into his rectum and the other consuming laxatives, his favourite being ‘senna’. He ludicrously divides his time between the kitchen and the bathroom. Preparing senna laxative with a saucepan and a spoon, and with a suppository melting invisibly in his rectum, comprises what his son calls “his *witchcraft*” (Roth 5). The image of Jake Portnoy “brewing those

veiny green leaves, stirring with a spoon, the evil smelling liquid, then carefully pouring it into a strainer and hence into his blockaded body, through that weary and afflicted expression on his face” (Roth 5) is one of the most hilarious vignettes we get of him in the novel. It is significant to note that Jake is associated with the witches with their weird cauldrons, kitchen utensils, and miraculous potions, just as Sophie is associated with the devil. Throughout the novel, the unmistakable impression that Jake produces is that of a delightful clown or fool. Bakhtin points out the link between folly and carnival:

Folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has the negative element of debasement and destruction and the positive element of renewal and truth. Folly is the opposite of wisdom—inverted wisdom, inverted truth. Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from ... seriousness ... gay folly was opposed to “piousness and fear of God”...this is why the theme of folly and the image of the incurable fool are so important in the festive atmosphere... (*Rabelais* 260).

The scene in which Jake’s family awaits the miracle of his bowel movement under the impact of the senna laxative is profoundly humorous. It is also a scene notable for the element of debasement in it. The family waits but the miracle doesn’t happen. Portnoy says: “...the miracle never came... as we

imagined and prayed it would be, as a lifting of the sentence, a total deliverance from the plague” (Roth 5). This is debasing the Biblical miracles which the devout have always believed in, profaning the sacred and the serious bringing it down to the lower realm of the bowels and the lower parts of the body. Bakhtin’s view of debasement, an inevitable feature of medieval carnival, is worth noting here: “Debasement of suffering and fear is an important element in the general system of degradation directed at medieval seriousness” (*Rabelais* 174). The scene, in which the radio news about atomic bombing prompts Jake’s terrified joke, “may be that would do the job” (Roth 5), the job of bringing about his bowel movement is an illustration of this type of debasement. This is analogous to an incident relating to Rabelais’s Pantolfe in *Pantagruel*. Pantolfe, who suffers from constipation, asks the innkeeper to fright him with a pitchfork so that his bowel movement could be activated. Commenting on the carnivalesque debunking of fear involved in the incident, Bakhtin comments: “Fear is debased through laughter” (*Rabelais* 174) The debasing and trivialising of the official solemnities, vaunted pride as God’s chosen people, worries and fears of the Jewish- American community is brought about predominantly by carnivalising the body and its functions like eating and drinking and defecating and thereby emphasising their basic humanness. Jake embodies grotesque realism. The enormous emphasis on his physiology, particularly its lower parts, the belly, the bowel, the anus and

their operation, signifies among other things the element of degradation, which according to Bakhtin the core principle of this grotesque realism.

Parodical prophesy is an interesting aspect of the carnivalesque. The prophesies of history are gloomy and serious. On the other hand, parodical prophesies tend to see the world, time and the future not as sober mystery play but as satiric drama. In the carnivalesque world, the grim eschatology of the middle ages, which opposed the merry and the jocular, is uncrowned and turned into a “gay monster” (*Rabelais* 237). Instead of accepting the future as being fixed, sad, and terrifying, it looks at time and destiny as being open and carefree and envisions a universe that is not necessarily tragic. In Jewish eschatology, the Jew is a perennial victim, one destined to suffer. This is clearly reflected in the Portnoy’s family’s view of the Holocaust. They don’t want Portnoy to forget that he is a Jew and that the Jew is one who has always been hunted, ostracized, victimized, and massacred. Portnoy’s mother, father, and sister are all of them shown in the novel as making efforts to drill this truth into his consciousness. For example, when he is fifteen, his sister confronts him and tells him angrily that had he been born in Europe, instead of America, he would have certainly been dead:

Dead, Gassed, or shot, or incinerated, or butchered or buried alive. Do you know that? And you could have screamed all you wanted that you were not a Jew, that you were a human being

and had nothing whatever to do with their stupid suffering heritage, and still you would have been taken away to be disposed of. You would be dead, and I would be dead.... And your mother and father would be dead. (Roth 77)

The sentiments expressed here sum up the Jewish community's murky vision of their existence. Portnoy's comment as he lies on the analyst's table, years later is deeply sarcastic: "I suppose the Nazis are an excuse for everything that happens in this house" (Roth 77). What Portnoy means is that all Jewish misery is, as a rule, accounted for in terms of anti-Semitism and that the Jewish- American diaspora is blind to its own defects.

Portnoy's rejection of his family's obsession with the Holocaust, and their lurking fear of its probable future recurrence suggests the urgency of overcoming it, through laughter, for successful survival. What Roth uncrowns through the figure of Portnoy, is the stupendous idea of the Jew as victim in Jewish eschatology. Eschatology, according to Bakhtin, has a special import in the context of the carnivalesque. Carnival elements can transmute the eschatology into a gay monster and "their common denominator is gay time....They humanise the development of history and prepare a sober and fearless knowledge of this process" (Roth 237). Bakhtin epigrammatically comments on Rabelais' effectual use of the principle of laughter embedded in games, riddles, and playful language: "Everything leads to a merry solution"

(*Rabelais* 233). In a sense, it may be said that this merry solution is what Roth holds up before the Jewish- Americans.

The Turkish bath episode provides a richly carnivalesque scene that has a touch of Jewish eschatology. One day, Jake Portnoy accompanied by his son goes to a Turkish bath. Inside the bath, there are men lying stretched out on rows of iron cots covered with white sheets looking “like the fatalities of a violent catastrophe”(Roth 47). To Portnoy, the entire bath appears to be a morgue. The terms of the comparison derive from a consciousness of the catastrophes of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The bath, where the muted orality of the bodies on the iron cots is sabotaged by their anal and nasal noisiness, emerges as a place of fun. In this carnivalesque ambience, their farting that rumbles like a “thunderclap” (Roth 47) and their snoring that roars like a “machinegun fire” (Roth 47) are the only signifiers of life. In the bath, father and son become spectator participants, as in a carnival. Farting and snoring are universally acknowledged sources of laughter and they are used in the scene to enhance its carnivalesque effect and also to suggest that the human physiology, when viewed from the right perspective, can be found to have within itself elements of the grotesque. The juxtaposition of images suggesting life and death in the scene may be read in the light of Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘double body’. Bakhtin observes:

The grotesque imagery constructs what we might call a double body. In the endless chain of bodily life it retains the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one (*Rabelais* 318).

Later, when both father and the son undress in the bath, Portnoy spots something on his undershorts. On discovering that it is his leaky anus, he makes frantic attempts to hide it from others, rendering the scene all the more farcical. Like a mouse, he hops frantically about on his toes, tries to clear his feet of his undershorts where, to his chagrin, bafflement, and mortification, “I always discover in the bottommost seam a pale and wispy brushstroke of my shit....I wipe and I wipe and I wipe...until that orifice of mine is red as a raspberry” (Roth 47). At this point, nudity, excreta, and even a little bit of erotica also enter the scene. Portnoy also recalls his father’s enormous sexual organ and the way he urinated passing streams of water “as thick and strong as rope” (Roth 47). The picture of the body massage in progress in the bath is equally interesting. The men lying on a marble slab and the masseurs are busy with their hands. They “smack them and knead them and push them around, they slowly twist their limbs as though to remove them in a piece from their sockets” (Roth 48). This resembles carnivalesque acts of beating and dismembering. Mockingly, Roth describes the bath as “...that purgatory wherein the agonies that come of an insurance agent, a family man, and a Jew will be steamed and beaten from my father’s body” (Roth 48).

The Turkish bath is subversively turned into carnivalesque ground. With its images of the human body and bodily functions like farting, snoring, and urinating, the bath scene is an engaging and entertaining one. It invokes, and parodies the tragic and catastrophic story of the Jew and treats it in terms of the material bodily stratum, in a vastly funny manner. Bakhtin's comment helps to throw more light on the bath episode:

The basic artistic purpose of the parodied and travestied prophecies and riddles is to uncrown gloomy eschatological time....The parodies renew time on the material bodily level, transforming it into a propitious and merry notion. (*Rabelais* 238).

The spirit of carnival is inclusive and eclectic. But Jewish rigidities, as Roth suggests, stubbornly rejects it, tabooing all forms of transgression. Religious and cultural boundaries must be respected at any cost. Miscegenation is unwarranted. Roth explores this theme through uncle Hymie and his family. Hymie is Portnoy's uncle. A successful businessman, he is, "tyrannical at home" (Roth 51). He is, invariably an 'agelast.' Hymie is authoritarian, serious, pious, and Semitic through and through. He lives in Newark with his family. A racist, he hates the Gentiles. His son is an ardent athlete. But his family is opposed to sports and games. It is this anti-athletic attitude is mocked at through the figure of Heshie's epileptic mother aunt

Clara. One day, Heshie breaks his wrist while playing hurdles and comes home from school with his arms in cast. On seeing Heshie she develops nervous seizures and drops in a faint to the kitchen floor. Heshie's cast, Portnoy humorously comments, was "the last straw that broke the camel's back" (Roth 53). This was the prevailing attitude toward athletics in general, and football in particular, among the Jewish parents in the neighbourhood. Portnoy recalls the Jewish stance on athletics:

It was for the goyim. Let them knock their heads together for "glory", for victory in the ball game! As my Aunt Clara put it in that taut, violin string voice of hers, "Heshie! Please! I don't need *goyische naches!*" Didn't need, didn't want such ridiculous pleasures and satisfactions as made the gentiles happy.... (Roth 55)

This attitude impacts quite negatively on their children. The Jewish High School, for instance, has a very pathetic record in football; it disappoints the young. But the parents are totally unconcerned. To them, loosing at football is "not exactly the ultimate catastrophe..." (Roth 55) Their psychology is of a different hue altogether:

What if we had lost? It turned out we had other things to be proud of...We were Jews---and not only were we not inferior to the goyim who beat us at football, but the chances were that we

could not commit our hearts to victory in such a thuggish game....We were Jews--- and we were superior. (Roth 56).

Miscegenation is beyond the Jewish imagination. This is brought out through Heshie's affair with the *shiksa* girl Alice Dembosky. When all attempts including exhortation by a rabbi, failed to dissuade the deviant son, the wrathful Hymie unscrupulously resorts to foul play. On meeting the girl secretly he tells her that his son is dying of an incurable disease; he also offers her five hundred and twenty dollars. Frightened, the girl accepts the offer. The affair comes to an abrupt end. Portnoy ironically says: "we are not a family that takes defection lightly" (Roth 58).

This creates a rather messy situation. A fight ensues in Hymie and Heshie in the cellar of their apartment, where Hymie stocks his bundles of soda water bottles. Heshie catches hold of a bottle and threatens to throw it on his father's face. Undaunted, Hymie advances and Heshie begins to run in a circular motion with the hard-faced Hymie close behind his heels. Finally, Hymie stalks him to a corner, wrestles him to the floor, and holds him there until Heshie has "screamed his last obscenity" (Roth 58). Heshie is subdued. The fight gains in thematic significance in the light of Bakhtin's comments:

Seriousness had an official tone....It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied and wore the mask of hypocrisy. Thus distrust of the

serious tone and confidence in the truth of laughter had a spontaneous, elemental character. (*Rabelais* 95)

Heshie, like Portnoy, embodies this distrust of the officialdom, but is rendered powerless and malleable. Nonetheless, the potential for protest, symbolised by the obscenities he screams out, continues to smoulder in him. For, the voices and bodies of the oppressed are where the seeds of transformation hibernate.

To Bakhtin, the ‘cellar’ which is a hole upon the earth is an emblem of descent, of movement downward. Heshie behaves like a carnival fighter. He destroys the cellar door, picks up bottles, and hurls them at the wall, and challenges his father to fight. Portnoy, mock-heroically and with an ironic side glance at Hollywood action films, comments: “It was as though a blockbuster had finally fallen upon Newark” (Roth 58). The scene is, undoubtedly, theatrical, but without a stage. Carnival, it is useful to remember here, is spectacle without a stage. The cellar is transfigured into a carnivalesque site, marked by grotesquery, by expressive excesses and performance. The Heshie- Hymie wrestling episode hilariously unveils how authority and officialdom suppress the carnival body and its rebellious, transgressive urge to conserve the status-quo. Heshie’s suffering and his wrestling have a deeper meaning which can be explained in terms of the ideas formulated by the cultural critic John Fiske in his essay, “Offensive Bodies and Carnival Pleasures”:

Pain is an important means by which social control is written on the body. It is inflicted juridically as punishment for those who deviate.... Wrestling's "spectacle of suffering" makes pain into an inversion of social norms, a liberating moment from normality, a symbolic statement of the desire for freedom from social control that the terrified social order can never extinguish or finally discipline. It is not surprising, then, that the painful and the grotesque offer threatening, undisciplined pleasures, or that they are subject to the discursive control of being given meanings of the unnatural, the deviant, that which must be cured or hidden, and that both are emphatically classed as socially undesirable. (95)

Roth's exasperation with Judaism is evident in his portrayal of the Jewish rabbi Warshaw who symbolises Jewish authority and officialdom. Integral to his personality is the Jewish sense of superiority over all other people of faith. In the Jewish community, the rabbi, as a rule, is held in great esteem and his advice is sought at critical junctures. This is seen when his help is solicited to dissuade Heshie from carrying on his affair with Alice Dembosky. Nonetheless, Roth makes a pathetically ludicrous figure of him, reducing him to a base bodily level:

Rabbi Warshaw is a fat, pompous, impatient fraud, with an absolutely grotesque superiority complex... the synagogue is how he earns his living, *and that's all there is to it*. Coming to the hospital to be brilliant about life to people who are shaking in their pyjamas about death is his business ... big, fat, comical son of a bitch. (Roth 74).

The image of the obese, hypocritical, and gluttonous Rabbi is an instance of grotesque degradation. It may be noted here, in a short story published earlier *The Conversion of the Jews*, Roth has in a more powerful vein ridiculed and caricatured the rabbi culture and ways through the figure of the ironically named rabbi Binder. Rabbi Warshaw, it may be suggested, resembles the 'sacristan' in Rabelais' *Gargantua*. Bakhtin says, "such a man manifested that blunt pious seriousness which was loathed by Rabelais. He is the enemy of gay, popular truth about change and renewal" (*Rabelais* 267).

The carnivalesque, however, finds its best and most spectacular expression in Roth's depiction of the novel's protagonist, Alexander Portnoy. His Jewish family's religious and cultural rigidities lead to exasperating inner conflicts in Portnoy. Home suffocates and circumscribes him and he finds himself at a loss to understand who he actually is. This identity crisis clubbed with prodigious resentment makes him rebel in weird ways. His dilemma is to be a Jewish Cane or a Jewish Abel. And, he resolves it choosing to be a

Jewish Cane. Accordingly, with his love of living a thoroughly human life he, grows, through boyhood and adolescence, to be the thirty-three year old Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities, jettisoning his family's Gentilism and breaking taboos—food taboos, sexual taboos, and socializing taboos.

Portnoy turns a transgressor. Carnival celebrates liberation from the established order and truth. Liberal, cavalier, and imbued with the Dionysian spirit as he is, Portnoy seeks it. This mindset makes him view religion as a repressive force that constructs boundaries and restrictions, discipline and obedience, renunciation and self-control, sobriety and sanctions, divides human communities, and makes them dangerously self-righteous and prejudiced against each other. He boldly declares, “I don't believe in God and I don't believe in the Jewish religion—or in any religion. They are all lies” (Roth 61). It is Portnoy's cultural catholicity that prompts him to denounce the Jewish condemnation of the White Christian culture. So, he crosses the lakshman rekhas of his religion and freewheels in the American *goyische* society and culture. Expressing the simple psychology behind his law-violation, he says, “...to break the law, all you have to do is---just go ahead and break it! All you have to do is stop trembling and quaking and finding it unimaginable and beyond you” (Roth 79). Rejecting the principle of perfection, he emphatically says at one moment, “I just refuse to be perfect” (Roth 108). It may be interesting to note here that it is this principle of

perfection or the ideal that is rejected through the carnivalesque representation of the grotesque body. Revelling in bodily images, Portnoy screams:

Oh my secrets, my shame, my palpitations, my flushes, my sweats! The way I respond to the simple vicissitudes of Human life! I can't stand anymore being frightened like this over nothing...Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough! (Roth 37)

Reminiscing before the psychoanalyst, Portnoy traces the genesis of his rebellion to the eating of the forbidden lobster one night: "It all begins with the breaking of one dietary law—eating lobster away from home" (Roth 94). His protest also takes the form of lusting after white girls and sleeping with them. The Jewish taboo against inter-religious sex, of which his mother constantly reminds him, is no bar to him. Even as a boy of fourteen, he adamantly refuses to go to the synagogue with his parents on holidays. His faith is in man's basic humanness and the inalienable rights it entails. He declares:

Religion is the opiate of the people. And if believing that makes me a fourteen-year old communist, then that's what I am and I am proud of it, I would rather be a communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue any day. I happen to believe in the rights of

man, rights such as are extended in the Soviet Union to all people, regardless of race, religion or colour. (*Rabelais* 74)

Portnoy's sexual transgressions are of a highly grotesque nature. He routinely masturbates. To him, it is a sort of avenue to freedom. He says, "I grab that battered battering ram to freedom" (Roth 33). The repeated images of Portnoy's masturbation are immensely carnivalesque in their highlighting of the grotesque body, particularly its lower stratum. Portnoy's fascination with his Phallus is especially significant in the context of the bakhtinian theory. Locked inside the bathroom, he masturbates into the toilet bowl, into the soiled clothes, into the laundry hamper, up against the medicine-chest mirror, and into his sister's brassier. Once, in the middle of a class, he raises his hands to be excused and rushes to the bathroom and masturbated in the lavatory, he also masturbates once inside a movie theatre, on an apple, and into an empty milk bottle. Portnoy even does it on a piece of liver which he himself buys from the butcher shop. He masturbates on a billboard on his way to a bar mitzvah lesson and violates the Jewish moral principles.

Portnoy's obsession with his phallus and with his masturbation assumes added significance in the context of the Bakhtin's vision of carnival sexuality. Bakhtin has pointed out Rabelais' use of certain words and phrases such as "stroke, to strike, to beat, blow and stick" (*Rabelais* 205) to suggest that the sexual act is a type of performance. It is, therefore, interesting that

Roth also uses these words in his description of the masturbation scenes where the phallus and the lower parts of the body are invariably foregrounded and celebrated on a tellingly carnivalesque canvass. In the light of the Rabelaisian terminological reverberation, discernible in these descriptions, the image of blows consistently associated with Portnoy's auto-eroticism metaphorically takes on an ambivalent meaning. For, "they at once kill and regenerate, put an end to the old life and start life anew" (*Rabelais* 205). It is evocative of the beating and thrashing of the agelasts in the carnivalesque world of Rabelais' *Pantagruel*. Analysing the punishment meted out to the catchpoles and agelasts, who symbolise die-hard tradition, Bakhtin comments: "these sacristans, hypocritical monks, morose slanderers, gloomy agelasts are killed, rent, beaten, chased, abused, cursed and derided" (*Rabelais* 206). In the process of beating, everything that is high, official, serious, spiritual, and terrifying is brought down to the body. Through the carnival of Portnoy's masturbations, Roth interrogates conventional sexual morality and subverts weather-beaten misconceptions about human sexuality.

In Bakhtin's conception, genital organs, particularly those unprotected and dysfunctional, have a greater grotesque potential. What may be termed the Testicle Episode hilariously exemplifies this. When Portnoy is in High school, one of his testicles, which are important for sexual and reproductive functions, disappears from his scrotum and starts moving up into the rim of his pelvis. He is subjected to a thorough physical examination by the family

doctor who states that one of his testicles has not fully descended to its proper position and that he has a deficiency of the androgen hormone. Embarrassed by the diagnosis, Portnoy imagines a probable grotesque transformation into a girl. Frightfully, he wonders what his predicament might then be:

I pondered my mystery....What if breasts began to grow on me, too? What if my penis went dry and brittle, and one day, while I was urinating, snapped off in my hand? Was I being transformed into a girl? (Roth 39).

The passage embodies the idea of the imperfect incomplete body with its duality and transformative capabilities. What Roth suggests is that there is, indeed, a strange and mysterious dimension to the human body which is always in the process of becoming. Physiologically, androgen deficiency is symptomatic of breast development. It is, however, used here to indicate the body's vulnerability to diseases. It also hints at a probable metamorphosis into something bizarre and non-normal. In this context, it may be relevant to note in the novella, *The Breast* subsequently published, Roth takes up the theme of metamorphosis in the gradual evolution of a man into a breast. Growths and eruptions which break off the limits of the fixed and closed body are characteristic features of the grotesque. Bakhtin says:

The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at

their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two bodied image. (*Rabelais* 322).

The mockery in the Testicle Episode is obviously directed at the medical and clinical procedures and discourses which turn human diseases into disasters. In Rabelais *Pantaguel* the physician who examines the body, the diagnosis and “the patient who fears a universal catastrophe” (*Rabelais* 180) are profiled quite humorously. Commenting on this, Bakhtin points out: “Rabelais develops his doctrine of the gay physician and of the healing virtue of laughter founded on Hippocrates and on other medical authorities” (*Rabelais* 179). The irony lies in the fact that Rabelais wittily exploits the medical theory of healing through laughter to treat, in his *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, the very medical science in a funny fashion.

The theme of the imperfect body can also be seen in the representation of the Jew suffering from a Jewish nose. The nose, like the mouth, tongue, and phallus is one of the elements of the grotesque body. In literature, the big-nosed Jew has often been represented comically, exaggerating the size of the nose as an emblem of Jewish egoism. The nose becomes one of the dominant factors differentiating the Jew from the other. For Portnoy, this nose is irritatingly grotesque, because it makes his ethnic identity visible. He cries, “I can lie about my name..., but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose?”

(Roth 149). The nose has erotic connotations, too. Bakhtin says, “it always symbolises the Phallus” (*Rabelais* 316). When Portnoy is worried over the size of his nose, his mother proudly tells him that, “it gives you character” (Roth 151). But Portnoy is so vexed with it that he even gets the uneasy feeling that his nose “is beginning to bend back toward my mouth...this thing will be directly in the path of the food” (Roth 150). Portnoy’s nose syndrome is a symbolic objectification of his anxieties about his Jewish identity as being a barrier to his assimilation into the mainstream American milieu. Extremely funny is the scene in which Portnoy examines his nose. Standing before the bathroom mirror, he presses his nostrils upward and, laughing at himself, comments “I look like Bugs Bunny!” (Roth 150), the funniest cartoon character Bugs Bunny, a rabbit. Many writers have used the nose humorously as an effective strategy to produce laughter. Gogol, Basheer, and Rushdie are some of them. For, the grotesque body is distinctive from the normal one. In his book, *Laughter* Henry Bergson observes that, “certain deformities undoubtedly possess over others the sorry privilege of causing some persons to laugh, some hunchbacks, for instance, will excite laughter”(75). For him, physical deformities, when judiciously treated, can excite a particularly grotesque form of laughter. Interestingly enough, Bergson draws attention to Rabelais’ texts, where potbellied monsters and other creatures with their oversized gargantuan bodies clearly exemplify this fact.

As for the theme of sexuality, Roth's treatment of it is enormously carnivalesque. The novel abounds in descriptions, often explicitly pornographic, of sexual acts. Portnoy's erotic adventures with white Gentile girls are particularly noteworthy. One of them occurs at the Girardi house. The episode involves an Italian girl Rita Girardy who is nicknamed Bubble Girardy. She is a grotesque figure "weighing a hundred and seventy pounds and growing a moustache" (Roth 177). Portnoy recollects the days when he along with his high school friends Smolka and Arnold Mandal used to visit her. Once Bubble agrees to jerk off one of them on two conditions that the person has to leave his pants on and she will give only fifty strokes and no more. They flip a coin and Portnoy gets the chance. The climax is tremendously farcical. Bubble stops exactly at fifty strokes. Running down her room Portnoy, finishes the job by himself. But the fluid spills into his eyes, and even "all over the couch! And the walls! And the lamp"(Roth180). Imagining he has been blinded, Portnoy becomes panicky, rushes toward the sink, washes his eyes and, at this point, sees the picture of Jesus Christ which he had noticed earlier, too:

Above the sink Jesus still ascends in his pink nightie. That useless son of a bitch! I thought he was supposed to make the Christians compassionate and kind. I thought other people's suffering is what he told them to feel sorry for. What bullshit! (Roth 181)

His earlier reflections on Jesus Christ are also worth mentioning:

Tacked above Girardy's sink is a picture of Jesus Christ floating up to heaven in pink night gown... looking as he does in the picture, was without a doubt the Pansy of Palastine. In a pageboy haircut with a Palmolive complexion – and wearing a gown that realized today must have come from Fredericks of Hollywood! Enough of God and the rest of that garbage. (Roth 168)

Christ and Christianity with its sexual austerities are, here, degraded and uncrowned. Transgression and debasement combine in conformity with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Foucault's views on profanation are also in place here. In his "A Preface to Transgression" he says:

Profanation in a world which no longer recognises any positive meaning in the sacred---is this not more or less what we may call transgression?.....Undoubtedly it is excess that discovers that sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience (58-59).

The obscene, vulgar, and uncensored language Portnoy uses obviously parallels the language of the marketplace. To Bakhtin, such speech breaks the norms of the official speech and enters the familiar marketplace, imparting a joyful strain to the polyphonic place. Portnoy's sexual relationships with

white girls symbolise freedom. He boldly asks, “What’s the crime? Sexual freedom? In this day and age? ...Whom am I harming with my lust?... I have desires---only they’re endless. Endless!” (Roth 103). Portnoy’s vindication of his exploits is like Browning’s truant monk, Fra Lippo Lippi’s. When caught, while sneaking back to his cell at dawn after a night of stealthy participation in carnival revelries which included amorous dalliances, too, he defends himself saying: “You think you see a monk/ I am flesh and blood...” (Browning 13). A carnivalesque vision of sexuality and bodily pleasures is what is strongly expressed when he exclaims, “what a mysterious business it is, the endless fascination of these apertures and openings” (Roth 103). The sexual act is an affair of the grotesque body, the body with its organic openings and apertures, with its transgressive, regenerative, and revolutionary powers.

What Portnoy calls “my orgiastic holiday” (Roth 120) is saturated with fun and farce. Portnoy visits Rome with his girl-friend, Mary Jane Reed, nicknamed “The Monkey” (Roth 137). There they pick a prostitute and the triumvirate indulge in sex. Portnoy describes the performance in detail:

The Monkey was by then the one with her back on the bed, I the one with my ass to the chandelier... and in the middle feeding tits into my Monkey’s mouth, and was our whore. Into whose whole, into what sort of whole, I deposited my final Lord is

entirely a matter of conjecture. It could be that in the end I wound up fucking my dank, odoriferous combination of sopping Italian pubic hair, greasy American buttock. (Roth 137-138)

The picture that emerges from Portnoy's account is one of sexual perversion, of erotic grotesquery in which transgression necessarily leads to the realisation of sexual fantasies. Portnoy and his girl have, in fact, "imagined it...in all its possibilities" (Roth 137). The Roman Orgy scene, with its scatological imagery and its emphasis on nakedness and the lower parts of his body, is a plane parody of pornography. It subverts the norms of sexuality and projects the Rothian vision of sex as performance, as an act of sheer pleasure. It is not an act of procreation alone. Nothing, as such, is taboo in sex.

As for the two women participants in the orgy, Roth has shaped them along the lines of carnival performers. The Monkey, an ex-fashion model is a sexual pervert. She earns "much in an hour posing for underwear ads" (Roth 105). She hails from a poor family, speaks a Latin variety of English and uses plenty of abusive and obscene expressions. Her handwriting is pathetic and she writes the same English word with three different spelling on the same paper. She has a grim past and she speaks about it with a sense of humour. At eleven she went to a ballet class without her father's permission. For this, he beat her mercilessly, tied her feet together and locked her inside a closet. At eighteen, a model, she married and divorced a rich, sexually deviant, fifty-

year old business man who used to make her sit and watch his sexual orgies. She has been ill-treated by one of her boyfriends; she has attempted suicide and engaged in a variety of perversions. It has, in fact, been a tumultuous life of many carnivalesque deaths and rebirths. She has no real identity and has “a many sided-character” (Roth 207). She is individualistic and self-willed. At one point, she tells Portnoy: “I’ll say and do and wear anything I want! This is a free country, you uptight Jewish prick!” (Roth 211). She is one of the most entertaining characters in the novel.

The Italian whore Lina is an equally carnivalesque figure. With a touch of Basheerean inclusiveness, and empathy for people like thieves and prostitutes, Roth portrays her in a positive light. She celebrates her body, loves to experience even the carnally new and innovative, and deeply delights in the life and the creative energy coursing through her being. Roth’s Lina is no victim, no commodity. She lives as though in a carnival, theatrically making a merriment of the act of living. Her costume signifies this. Watching her undress, Portnoy comments:

The whore...took her dress off standing in the middle of the room; underneath she wore a “merry widow” corset, from which her breasts bubbled up at one end, and the more than ample thighs rippled out at other. I was astonished by the garment and its theatricality. (Roth 136)

She has one child and she loves children. Yet, since she cannot manage more than one, she is “always in and out of the abortionist’s office” (Roth 140). She is totally ignorant of the techniques of birth control. Portnoy asks Monkey to explain it to her and, when she is about to leave, he even gives her Enovid, Monkey’s contraceptive pill. It may be noted that during the 1960s, America was undergoing great social and cultural shifts. Sexual Revolution, women’s rights movements, and youth culture had begun to register their impact on life. Sex, marriage, and family were some of the spheres where traditional ideas and attitudes were being prominently contested.

Roth has been accused of misogyny. The argument is that he has repeatedly, and insistently, portrayed the female body and its sexuality with indecorous exaggerations. This, it may be suggested, is a rather simplistically reductionist view which does not take into proper consideration the thematic and narratological purposes behind the portrayal and which conveniently overlooks his portrayal of men in an equally indecorous way, as is done, for instance, in the case of Portnoy. Are we to contend that Roth is a male-hater or that he sees male sexuality as an accursed thing simply on the strength of his portrayal of the male body and its sexuality in ways offensive to conventional morality. To do so would be nothing less than doing injustice to the ideas and concerns he explores through his characters, using the grotesque and carnivalesque as both mode and theme. What Roth vehemently puts across through his women characters is that the female body has immense

potentials, including the potential of sex for both pleasure and procreation and that it is, as Bakhtin views it, grotesque with its native orifices and openings.

The grotesque female body can unsettle the power structures of patriarchy. In the novel, Roth shows this through Lina, Girardy, and Mary Jane Reed. These women can pose a threat to masculinity and male supremacism. This idea is well brought out in the discussion on abortion, contraceptives, and birth-control. Indeed, Roth touches on the feminist liberatory vision of reproductive freedom, pointing it up as an inalienable human right. Roth's women characters are rebels and transgressors, possessing the power to turn oppressive systems and institutions upside down. In her book, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983), Gloria Steinem aptly observes:

Obviously, this ultimate bargaining power on the part of women is exactly what male supremacists fear most. That's why their authoritarian impulse is so clearly against any sexuality not directed towards family-style procreation (that is against extra marital sex, homosexuality, and lesbianism, as well as contraception and abortion). (173)

Jean Baudrillard's views on liberation may help a better understanding of the Roth's Roman Orgy episode. In his essay "After the Orgy" he observes: "If I were asked to characterise the present state of affairs, I would

describe it as “after the orgy” (4). Also, identifying orgy with liberation he claims that there has been, in the post-war period, liberation in every sphere of western society, in the sphere of sexuality, of women, of children, of art and so on as Baudrillard puts it: “Now everything has been liberated. Now all we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation” (Roth 4). As he sees it, the state of utopia and liberation has, in a sense, come about. Baudrillard says again: “The state of Utopia realised, of all utopias realised so that it can enter a pure state of circulation.... The fact is that the revolution has well and truly happened...” (Roth 4). Baudrillard’s idea of orgy as a force conducive to liberation, which is embedded in his words, reinforces the idea of liberation inherent in the Bakhtinian vision of the carnivalesque. Portnoy is, indeed, a product of the age mapped by Baudrillard, the age that is ‘after the orgy’, after liberation. When viewed in this light, Portnoy’s transgressions turn out to be not just acts of protest against Jewish mores and virtues but a powerful expression of his deep-seated desires to live up to the times, even if it means assimilation into the WASP society. Accordingly, the life he fashions for himself becomes his second life. Carnival is people’s second life; organised, as it is, on the basis of laughter, it is a festive life, too. Carnival is “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal” (*Rabelais* 10). It is this feast that Portnoy is feeding on. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* carnival is not only a technique, but a theme as well.

Rome, the locale of Portnoy's orgies with the Monkey and the prostitute, is, in fact, a city in central New York. The name, however, is evocative of the ancient Roman Empire and of its annual Saturnalia, festival of Saturn characterised by general feasting and unrestrained merry making. Later, when the Roman Empire fell, and paganism more or less disappeared, the Saturnalian spirit did not. It rejuvenated itself in the carnival of Christian Europe with Rome as its seat of authority. The instinct to laugh and be merry is primeval, ancient and universal. Also, it is fundamentally the same, whether it expresses itself in Rome, the Italian capital city or the American city of Rome. Portnoy has his carnival life in the American cities Greece and Athens which invariably point in the direction of the country of Greece and its capital Athens. Roth's choice of these hyperreal cities with historically, and geographically suggestive names reinforces the idea that the carnival spirit is universal and of ancient origin.

In the context of the history of the Jewish people and of the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, after the Second World War, the image of Israel in *Portnoy's complaint* assumes great cultural and political significance. During his visit to Israel, Portnoy meets a native Israeli girl named Naomi. Six-foot in height, she is an army officer, imbued with the Jewish sense of superiority over others. It is interesting to note that Naomi sees in Portnoy only an impure WASP, a polluted variety of the real Jew. When she calls him a self-hating American Jew, all that he can do is to disregard it with typical

Portnovian humour and bravado, saying “wonderful, now let’s fuck” (Roth 241). While clownishly manoeuvring to induce her to have sex with him, he suddenly becomes impotent. When viewed from a Bakhtinian perspective, it is suggestive of the grotesque body, since his male body has now become defectively incomplete. There may also be a certain amount of political symbolism in the Naomi-Portnoy encounter. Portnoy is an American. Through the failure of the physical union he longs for with Naomi, Roth, it may be said, is casting an ironic look on America’s well-known relations with Israel. Israel with its radical Jewish culture and America with its cultural liberalism are poles apart. As such, the relationship between the two will never attain real intimacies; it will only be a superficial one. The impotence, which overtakes Portnoy before Naomi, is suggestive of the powerlessness brought about on the young generation of Jews like him by the Jewish culture, the type of culture represented by Naomi and Sophie Portnoy. It is significant that Naomi reminds him of his mother. This shows that there is an identity between the two in terms of their Jewishness and attitudes. The younger generation of Jews would love to adapt and live an eclectic life. But, the cultural heritage, to which Jews like Sophie Portnoy and Naomi fanatically cling, is a blockage to them, as it is to Portnoy himself. It is this painful predicament that Portnoy angrily laments:

I am not in this boat alone, oh no, I am on the biggest troop ship
afloat ... only look in through the portholes and see us there,

stacked to the bulk Heads in our bunks, moaning and groaning with such pity for ourselves, The sad and watery-eyed sons of Jewish parents, sick to the gills from rolling through these heavy seas of guilt---and oh sick, sick as dogs --- who had the most castrating mother, who the most benighted father, I can match you bastard, humiliation for humiliation, shame for shame... the retching in the toilets after meals, the hysterical deathbed laughter from the bunks, and the tears – Oh, my Jewish men friends! My dirty-mouthed, guilt-ridden brethren! My sweethearts! My mates! Will this fucking ship ever stop pitching? When? When, so that we can leave off complaining how sick we are—and go out into the air, and live! (Roth 118-119).

Extensive use of nomenclature and word play are features of the carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, most of the Rabelaisian stylistic devices have derived from oral and folk traditions and also from various branches of science. Names of places, food, diseases, well-known brands of commodities, names TV stars and performers particularly comedians, abound in *Portnoy's Complaint*. This panoramic nomenclature delightfully comprehends the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual American salad bowl and a plethora of social and intellectual movements, and academic disciplines. The interspersing of Yiddish terms and expressions throughout the novel is

designed to highlight the speech patterns of the Jewish American diaspora. This adds to the delight provided by the novel's dialogic and polyphonic world of the novel.

Nicknaming has always been part of folk culture. It is a measure of a folk sense of humour, of its capacity to laugh even in hard and adverse situations. Roth's nicknames, like Rabelais' and Basheer's remarkably contribute to the novel's carnivalesque ambience. They are culturally and physiologically specific as the case with nicknames as always been all over the world. The nicknames of Portnoy's girl friends are of gay nature and they entail praise and abuse. Kay Campbell is called 'pumpkin' because her thighs are large; Mary Jane Reed is called 'Monkey' because she is fond of perversions; Sarah Abbot Maulsby is nicknamed 'pilgrim', for she hails from a refined WASP family.

A striking feature of the novel is its pervasive disease imagery. A number of diseases with their names are mentioned in the novel. It is interesting to note that even 'Portnoy's complaint', the novel's title neologically becomes the name of a disease. As a strategy, the disease imagery enhances the novel's carnivalesque effect and, as a theme it highlights the idea of the grotesque body. There are references to Sophie's hysterectomy, to Portnoy's Androgen deficiency, and his Osgood Schlatterer's disease. The abbreviated 'syph' standing for the venereal disease, syphilis,

occurs repeatedly in the novel. Also, there is gangrene from footbath, ptomaine from the hotdogs, elephantiasis from the soap and the towels, diarrhoea and colitis from bad eating habits. Bronchitis, cancer, polio, hysteria, dysentery, spinal meningitis also find mention. Roth's use of disease imagery is analogous to Rabelais'. Bakhtin observes:

Sufferers from gout and venereal disease are often featured in Rabelais' novel.... Gout and syphilis are "gay diseases," the result of overindulgence in food, drink, and sexual intercourse. They are especially connected with material bodily lower stratum. (Rabelais 161)

The disease imagery subverts the human fear of disease and the exaggerated obsession with the body, its looks and fitness. This fear and obsession is what easily allows a variety of institutions to control, manipulate, and exploit the body by associating it with food, dirt, water, sex and, sin and after life, beauty, and athletics. Different societies and ages constructed concepts of health and disease in different ways. The commercialization and profiteering rampant in the medical field and profession is a classic instance of the exploitation of the fear and anxiety that disease generates in a patient. The beauty culture which involves a host of things from lipsticks to cosmetic surgery capitalises, and thrives on the obsession with bodily good looks. The disease imagery embodies Roth's ironic vision of the politics of body to

which society has always resorted in order to control the body and its transgressive propensities. Roth's is a plea on behalf of liberating the Prometheus of the human body from its manacles of irrational fears. This liberation, it may be kept in mind, is the motive force behind Portnoy's carnivalesque adventures.

No one, who reads *Portnoy's Complaint*, can afford to overlook its dense intertextuality. The Freudian intertext could be discerned throughout the novel. Sophocles, Doestoevsky, Kafka, Shakespeare, James Joyce, Beckett, Wordsworth, and W. B. Yeats are among the countless writers alluded to in the novel. It is relevant to note here that Julia Kristeva's concept of Intertextuality is based on Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism. She suggests that intertextuality is a form of dialogism. In the hands of postmodern writers, intertextuality operates as a playful device used to parody tradition, to subvert the canonical in literary texts. Bakhtin's dialogism involves an interplay between genres, styles, and voices. In other words, it has elements of polyphony and heteroglossia, too. Roth's parody of Yeats' poem, "Leda and the Swan", is an instance of this. Roth reinterprets it so as to point up the theme of sexual transgression and grotesquery and thereby make it harmonise with the novel's carnivalesque mode and theme. This Rothian method accords well with the Bakhtinian view of parody as an innate trait of the novel which, as a genre, has the potential to look critically at other genres. To Bakhtin, the novel is perennially open-ended and indeterminate. In his *Problems of*

Dostoevsky's Poetics (1972), Bakhtin says the novel as a genre “lives in the present and always remembers the past” and It is “always old and new simultaneously” (106). In this sense, Roth’s intertextuality is dialogic, too.

Portnoy's Complaint bears the unmistakable imprint of its times. In understanding the novel, it is important to remember that Roth was born in 1933 and that the novel was published in 1969, when he was only thirty six. Portnoy’s date of birth, significantly enough, is also 1933. Roth, therefore, had grown up through the 40s, 50s, and 60s, the post-war decades of massive changes and conflicts in the American socio-cultural scenario. The success theory, individualism, the pursuit of personal happiness and gratification, feminist and Civil Rights movements, youth culture in rebellion against tradition, consumerism, and issues of assimilation had all contributed to the making of a liberal, permissive and even carnivalesque culture shockingly at odds with the past. This was the milieu in which Roth found himself as an adolescent and a young man. And this is the milieu in which Portnoy finds himself as he grows up to be a young man of thirty three. His love of freedom, his rebellion and transgression, his contempt for religion and cultural heritage, and even his negative attitude towards parents and family are an index of the impact of the altered society around him. *Portnoy's Complaint* is clearly a mirror held up to its times.

Chapter III

Voices from the Underground

Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), one of the greatest of Afro-American novelists, was born in Oklahoma City. His father Lewis Alfred was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. The untimely death of his father was considerably upsetting to Ellison. He got his first glimpses of American racism during those times when his father and other black veterans gathered together to make merry and to discuss the politics of the day. The young Ellison used to listen intently to the stories of these black veterans who had bravely fought in the war for America, but yet had been denied equal rights and condemned to suffer racial discriminations. However, their discussions had a strain of optimism, too. Their vehement hope of a golden day when racism and all its concomitant social and political evils would be a thing of the past was evident in their discussions. The influence of these experiences on the young Ellison can be discerned in his humorous depiction of The Golden Day bar in his novel, *Invisible Man*. It may be useful to remember here that the psychologically deranged war veterans who visit the bar have all been victims of white racism. Perhaps, while constructing the bar scene, the black war veterans he had encountered in the company of his father in his boyhood days were at the back of his mind.

Ellison's father was a devoted reader of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He admired Emerson's spiritual and intellectual views and was greatly fascinated by his emphasis on the idea of individual freedom. This explains why he named his son Ralph Waldo Ellison. Perhaps, the father hoped that his boy would someday be able to live up to the great American writer's legacy and ideals. Young Ellison, however, felt that his name was too pretentious for a black youth whose chances in life were pretty limited because of his racial predicament. Ironically enough, in later years, when his writing career began to show clear signs of success, he more or less came to terms with his name. For, he then seemed to see his own connection with a shared cultural heritage. Young Ellison's visits to his paternal grandfather in South Carolina also had left their imprint on him. Though born a slave and illiterate throughout his life, his grandfather was a proud man who was politically active in his small southern community of Blacks during the years of Reconstruction. Ellison's mother, Ida also took especial care of their children and was greatly desirous of getting them educated at all costs. Accordingly, she worked at a variety of jobs and very often brought home books and magazines for them to read. Ellison's contact with Jefferson Davis Randolph, who was a prominent and respected leader of the Black community in Oklohoma, helped him acquire a deep knowledge of black folklore. Randolph impressed the young Ellison with the mythological and legendary tales he related with a unique blending of black humour and vernacular. His narrative style contributed to the

novelist's love of language in many ways. Randolph repeatedly told Ellison that African Americans were also the inheritors of a rich cultural heritage.

Some of the familiar tales Ellison heard from Randolph were the trickster tales about Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear, Brer Rabbit, and Brer Fox. He also told the young Ellison real stories about runaway slaves. These stories had a double effect on Ellison. On the one hand, they entertained him; on the other, they went a long way in opening his eyes to the miserable realities of the lives of the Blacks. The motif of flight in *Invisible Man*, may have its source in these stories of flight and suffering.

Throughout his life, Ellison was a passionate lover of music. Oklohome was, in many respects, a segregated city, but it was never short of jazz and blues. These musical forms were encouraged by both the church and Afro-American schools in the city. Jazz and blues constituted an entirely original type of music born out of Afro-American vernacular and afflicted life. Ellison was pretty well- trained both in black folk music and western classical music. For him, as well as for many other jazz musicians who innovated a number of techniques to combine the supposedly profane black music and the supposedly sacred western classical music, blending of these two musical forms was a subversive act. Music expanded the horizons of Ellison's literary taste, influencing both his fiction and his criticism. After his graduation in 1933, Ellison, on receiving a music scholarship, went to the

Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It was during the years of Depression that he set out for the Institute to pursue his dreams and learned that life was not as smooth as he had thought it to be. The Depression had immeasurably affected the life of Afro- Americans. Ellison did not have enough of money to travel to Tuskegee.

As such, he decided to ride the rail illegally like most of the other young black men and women of the time. This adventure quickly turned out to be a nightmare. The watchful eyes of the racist white detectives fell on him and he was caught and beaten up by them. But, he somehow managed to escape further brutalities, taking advantage of the mass confusion at the railway station and found a hiding place under a railroad shed. He remained in his hiding place until it was safe the next morning. The chase, the flight and the eventual discovery of a safe place to hide, which are all significant incidents the young black protagonist in *Invisible Man* goes through, obviously derive from these personal experiences of the young Ellison.

Ellison's life at Tuskegee proved fruitful in many ways. The place and the Institute helped him acquire a new lifestyle and develop a career in music. He became a composer and a musician. Ellison found it hard to put up with the hypocrisy and attitudes of some of its faculty and student community. He rebelled and left the Institute. The reverberations of this incident can be discerned in *Invisible Man*. Nevertheless, the overall influence of Tuskegee

on Ellison was benign. This is evident in the essays he later wrote when he had become a celebrated writer and critic. These essays, collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964), were recollections of his Tuskegee days in a tone of appreciation. At Tuskegee, Ellison had ample opportunities to visit libraries and read a considerable amount of literature. He was particularly fond of modern European literary texts. It was at this time that he first came across T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This great modern poem had a lasting impact on Ellison.

Ellison's migration from the south of America to Harlem in the north was an event of consequence for him. His years in Harlem, where he had gone in search of a suitable job, left their indelible mark on his subsequent life and career. Harlem seemed to him to be a veritable site and symbol of Afro-American progress and hope. It was a centre of urban living, with numerous black-owned institutions. Afro-Americans enjoyed more freedom in Harlem than in the southern states. Nonetheless, Harlem had its drawbacks, too. During the Depression years, there was large scale migration of blacks from the south to northern cities, particularly Harlem. This had precipitated, in Harlem, overcrowding and unemployment. Besides, at the time Harlem was instinct with the frenzies and the anxieties and fears resulting from the activities of free-wheeling black political separatists and religious groups, who, taking advantage of the latitudes available to the blacks in Harlem, were resisting racism and all the injustices accompanying it. These factors

invariably contributed to making black life in Harlem generally uneasy and restive. Moreover, Ellison also witnessed the aftermath of the Harlem Riot of 1935. The increased racial animosity between blacks and whites, the inordinately cruel treatment of blacks by white policemen, and the eruption of the riot again in 1943 were all experiences that sank deep into Ellison's consciousness. It is, therefore, not surprising that he could put this socio-political and cultural environment to effective use in his fiction. In spite of all its discomfitures, Harlem was a stretch of fertile soil for Ellison, remarkably contributing to his growth, intellectually and as a creative writer. He was part of the Harlem Renaissance intellectual community to which he had been introduced by the Harlem Renaissance leader, Alain Locke whom he had first met at the Tuskegee Institute and later in Harlem. It was through Locke that Ellison became friends with Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. During this period, Ellison read the proletarian and political writings of Nelson Algren and Andre Malraux and became aware of American communism to which he promptly took a fancy. However, his association with the communist ideology did not last long and he turned his back on it, like Richard Wright. This estrangement with communism is reflected Ellison's ironic treatment of it in *Invisible Man*.

During the years of World War II, Ellison was constrained to keep his writing career mostly in abeyance, as he was enlisted with the merchant marine. Nevertheless, he managed to publish some of his short stories

including the celebrated “King of the Bingo Game (1944)” and “Flying Home (1944)” both of which were later on made into films. In the Post-War era, Ellison solidly established himself as a writer in the Afro-American literary tradition, with the publication of his epic novel, *Invisible Man in 1952*. This novel was born out of the social, cultural and political situations of the Afro-Americans over the years and, in particular, of Ellison’s times when they were virtually invisible as human beings on the social landscape of America. *Invisible Man* was chosen as the most outstanding novel of 1952 and it won the National Book Award in 1953. It has since been translated into over 15 languages. Literary critics quickly recognized Ellison’s intensive knowledge of such classical and modern authors as Homer, Dostoevsky, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Mark Twain, and T.S Eliot whose influences could be seen in *Invisible Man*.

Ellison’s writing career did not, in fact, end with *Invisible Man*. His two famous collections of essays are *Shadow and Act (1964)* and *Going to the Territory(1986)*. His other works include the posthumously published *Collected Essays (1995)*, the story collection *Flying Home and Other Stories (1996)* and *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray (2000)*. His much awaited second novel *Junteenth* was assembled and posthumously published by John Callahan in 1999.

Invisible Man had its impact on the social and political milieu of America. The anti-communism of the McCarthy Era, the post-war emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the disillusionment of the Watergate era, the championing of multiculturalism as a positive American value and the conservatism of the Reagan years and other significant historical events prompted the reading public to view Ellison's works, particularly *Invisible Man* from different and shifting perspectives. For instance, in such a world that had already begun to see the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the dismantling of Berlin Wall, the Americans were quick to note the relevance of Ellison's anti-communist stance in *Invisible Man*.

Ralph Ellison's artistic imagination found its most powerful expression in *Invisible Man* (1952). Playful, episodic, and rhetorical, it is a vehement exploration into black-white relations and the issue of black identity in the context of post-war America. Reading the novel from a carnivalesque perspective will help us better understand its thematic ramifications and the various strategies Ellison adopts to lay bare the harsh realities of black life and to insinuate the ways in which these could be effectively surmounted. The politics of the carnivalesque, which is embodied in his black narrator-protagonist, the Invisible Man, is one way to break the boundaries of race. The novel's humour primarily stems from the people who inhabit it. Most of them are, in a sense, grotesque clowns and tricksters and through their

speeches and actions Ellison subverts the racial games of both the whites and the blacks. Parody, mockery, allusion, dream, memory, jazz and blues are major devices Ellison liberally resorts to in order to present the evolution of the black community as a saga from intense suffering and travails to one of carnivalesque renewal and rebirth.

The novel's prologue, which is parodic and intertextual, introduces the opening scene set in an underground basement which the black protagonist, driven by the force of circumstances, has now converted into a safe and solitary abode for himself. He laughs and talks about his invisibility with a sense of humour that is native to him:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids---Like the bodiless head you see sometimes in circus sideshows... (Ellison 3).

The prologue is Rabelaisian in terms of style and function. The Prologues of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, as Bakhtin points out, develop in the form of familiar speech strewn with flashes of irony, comedy, mockery, allusion, and verbal travesty. These prologues, contrary to conventional prologues, evoke an atmosphere of “fearless, free, and gay truth”(Rabelais 167). Commenting on the Rabelaisian practice, Bakhtin observes:

The man who is speaking is one with the crowd; he does not present himself as its opponent, nor does he teach, accuse or intimidate it. He laughs with it. There is not the slightest tone of morose seriousness in his oration. This is an absolutely fearless talk, free and frank which echoes in the festive square beyond all verbal prohibitions, limitations and conventions.... (*Rabelais* 167-168)

In proclaiming his fundamental and inalienable humanity, the Invisible Man identifies himself with the rest of humanity; in other words, he becomes ‘one with the crowd’. The claim, it is interesting to note, is exactly the same as the claim, “... zooks, sir, flesh and blood,/That's all I'm made of!”, which Browning’s monk Fra Lippo Lippi makes to vindicate his transgression when he is caught by the watch and ward while sneaking back to his cell at dawn after a night of carnival revelries.

The teasingly debasing tone of the Invisible Man’s speech becomes clear when he corroborates that he is invisible “simply because people refuse to see me”(Ellison 3). His invisibility, as he delightfully phrases it, “is not a matter of biochemical accident to his epidermis” (Ellison 3). It is, in truth, the result of a “peculiar disposition in the eyes” (Ellison 3) of the beholders, and “a matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes” (Ellison 3). He can even afford a hearty joke about his predicament: “It is sometimes advantageous to

be unseen” (Ellison 3). Rabelais’s prologues mock and cavil at ‘the messengers of darkness” (*Rabelais* 172); so also, Ellison’s prologue laughs at both the psychological darkness of the whites who refuse to see the blacks as human beings and also at the nonchalance of the Blacks who refuse to wake adequately up to the sordid realities of their existence. The Invisible Man recounts an anecdote about a fight which makes him aware of the real nature of his invisibility. One night, he accidentally bumps against a tall blond white man on the street. The man insults him and stubbornly refuses to apologise. Infuriated, the Invisible Man attacks him, strikes him until his mouth turns frothy with blood and, eventually, takes out his knife to slit his throat and kill him. At this juncture, the recognition that his white opponent is one who belongs to the class of those who have but only a “poor vision” (Ellison 3) dawns upon him. Pushing him down to the ground, he makes off laughing. The fight scene represents the carnivalesque moment of self-recognition, the moment of epiphany. Recollecting the incident, the Invisible Man says, “I began to laugh at this crazy discovery” (Ellison 5). He has discovered the truth underlying the racist social structure, a structure in which the white man has been nurtured to look upon the Blacks as inferior creatures. His laughter is Menippean; it is ambivalent carnivalesque laughter. Bakhtin’s vision of laughter is of note here:

Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth. It cannot be transformed into seriousness without

destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils. Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor.... It unveils the material bodily principle in it. Laughter opened men's eyes on that which is new, on the future....Laughter showed the world anew in its gayest and most sober aspects. (*Rabelais* 94)

With his eyes now open, the Invisible Man resolves to celebrate his invisibility, playfully capitalise on it, and live a novel life, putting an end to everything that is old. He says, "I gave up... my old way of life" (Ellison 5). He speculates on a new way of combating the white supremacist officialdom. He is confident that "it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realising it" (Ellison 5). In fact, what he visualises is a sort of guerrilla fight. Accordingly, he makes the underground basement his new home and calls it a hole. However, he makes evident that he is not going to stay in his hole forever. He declares that he is not dead and that he is only in a state of hibernation, because "hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (Ellison 13). His underground life is his second life and it is his preamble to a revolutionary rebirth. His gestures underground are funny and carnivalesque. He steals electricity from a nearby power station and wires the entire ceiling, the wall, and even the floor of his underground home with 1,369 Monoplated light bulbs. It is, as he puts it, "an act of sabotage" (Ellison 7). Metaphorically, he asserts, "light gives birth to my form....That is

why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power” (Ellison 6). He plays his radio phonograph, listens to Louis Armstrong’s blues, eats his favourite vanilla ice cream, and smokes reefer. He sweats perennially, too. Light, music, eating, smoking and sweating are carnivalesque images. To the Invisible Man, light symbolises knowledge and creativity. Parodying Keats he says: “The truth is the light and light is the truth” (Ellison 7). He views music as a catalyst to action and he wants to feel and experience its impact in its totality. An ardent lover particularly of loud, boisterous, pulsating music, he plans to put together a number of phonographs, play them simultaneously, and then hear it “not only with my ear, but with my whole body” (Ellison 8). It is in this bizarre and grotesque ambience that the Invisible Man writes his memoir as a strategy not only to sabotage the White’s world, but also to go with it, belong to it, and live in it, freed and renewed. His narrative goes back in time, recapturing the events and experiences of what he himself ironically calls his “pre-invisible” (Ellison 48) days.

The opening scene, with its insistent topographical images of the hole, the basement, the underground, and the cellar, acquires a deeper significance when seen from a carnivalesque perspective. It denotes the downward and upward movement of Bakhtin’s metaphoric “grotesque swing” (*Rabelais* 370), the swing of death and rebirth. The Invisible Man’s actions, it may be suggested, are symbolic of turning everything upside down, oriented toward change and renewal. Unconventionally enough, the downward movement has,

in Bakhtin's theory, a positive meaning. Noticing its repeated presence in Rabelais's images, he explains:

The mighty thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of human body, is reflected in Rabelais's entire world from beginning to end. Rabelais's world in its entirety...is directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily.... This downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside out..., upside down, such is the direction of all these movements.... We also see this downward movement in fights, beatings and blows; they throw the adversary to the ground, trample him into earth. They bury their victim. But at the same time they are creative; they sow and harvest. (*Rabelais* 370)

Ellison's image of the underground Invisible Man and his style of life, it may be contended, embodies a prophetic peep into the carnivalesque counterculture that subsequently swept across the American social landscape. Jazz, the blues, reefer, lights, and the basement, all of which Ellison highlights, have been organic to this culture. For, they are capable of exciting the Dionysian spirit. Post- 1960 America witnessed the rise of such a culture, with its underground music clubs and rave dancers. Popularly known as the Rave Culture, it seemed to be a version of the ancient bacchanalia. Dancing

to the tunes of thunderous music, uninhibited smoking of drugs, and enormous drinking of alcohol have been central features of this culture indulged on underground locations. In her book, *Club Cultures* (1996), Sarah Thornton suggests that these underground revelries had taken on a ritualistic dimension and that clubbing had become an activity akin to the rite of passage. It was a type of social drama in which conflicts were symbolically played out for relief. In his celebrated book, *Generation Ecstasy* (1999), Simon Reynolds says: “Rave is more than music plus drugs; it’s a matrix of lifestyle, ritualised behaviour, and beliefs” (9). In this view, the rave culture becomes a continuation of the carnivalesque elements to be discerned in popular cultural forms.

The scene of the Battle Royale provides one of the most telling carnivalesque episodes in *Invisible Man*. Its carefully constructed images suggestively probe the depth and breadth of black-white relations. The scene is a remarkable enactment of the racial game cast in the form of a boxing match in an extremely festive mode. At his graduation, the young Invisible Man makes a speech on humility. It impresses the white officials of the school. Accordingly, he is invited to speak before a white gathering at a luxurious hotel in the town. Deeply delighted, he arrives at the hotel’s ball room where he is forced to participate in a smoker, a boxing match, called Battle Royale. In the ballroom, he also sees some black boys from his school brought for fighting in the smoker and a group of white men “wolfing down

the buffet food, drinking beer and whisky and smoking cigars”(Ellison 17). The whites comprise bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, and merchants. The ball room is filled with the smell of tobacco and whisky. The Invisible Man sees there “a sea of faces, some hostile, some amused” (Ellison 19). The scene with its banquet imagery, its motley crowd, and its hurly-burly creates a carnivalesque atmosphere. The naked blonde woman positioned at the centre of the crowd amplifies the scene’s carnivalesque impact, investing it with an element of the purely carnal. The responses of the Invisible Man, the black teenage fighters, and the white mob at her sight are noteworthy, since they seem designed to escalate the scene’s farcical potential. The Invisible Man recalls the dancing girl’s impact on the black fighters:

I almost wet my pants....I felt a blast of cold air chill me....some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked....On my right I saw one boy faint....Another boy began to plead to go home. He was the largest of the group, wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him....He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves. (Ellison 19-20)

This is, indeed, an enormously grotesque and hilarious representation of the black body. Through it, the degradation of the black fighters’ fear and

of the system that produces it is effectively done. The emphasis is on the instinctive but weird and funny gestures of the body which provoke laughter as a means of debasement. The grotesque, by its very nature, is not only contra-distinct from, but also opposed to the ideal. The rich white officials at the venue and the blonde, who dances, flamboyantly and transgressively exhibiting her corporeal perfectness are also degraded in a similar vein. The basic principle of grotesque realism is to degrade and to make the degraded dwindle into its material elements like flesh and earth. The depiction of the blonde is of relevance here:

...in the centre, facing us, stood a magnificent blonde—stark naked.... The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and roughed, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the colour of the baboon's butt.... Her breasts were firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples. (Ellison 19)

The similitudes of the circus Kewpie doll, the baboon's butt, and the domes of the East Indian Temples used to delineate the blonde's physicality blend praise and abuse. This is in tune with the Bakhtinian idea of subversion through a witty hybridity of praise and abuse. The blonde who dances, 'like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils' (Ellison 19) is on a par with the female dancers and performers of carnivals. It is significant that only the whites are allowed

to touch her. This adumbrates the white attitude that a white woman rightfully belongs to the whites alone and that the blacks, who inwardly lust after her, will only be transgressing the racial bounds if they try even to touch her. The irony directed against this attitude is also embedded in Ellison's ludicrous mapping of the terror-filled lust generated in the Black fighters by the blonde's sensuality.

Ellison's portrayal of the white men crazily chasing the dancing blonde is greatly melodramatic. The droll-like episode is obviously designed to subvert the white, racist stereotypical constructions of black male sexuality and of the Big black rapist. Yelling, shouting, and laughing aloud, the fuddled white men eye her lasciviously. Toppling chairs and breaking bottles, they scuttle about and surround her, creating an erotic pandemonium. "It was mad....They caught her...they tossed her twice and her soft breasts seemed to flatten against the air and her legs flung wildly as she spun" (Ellison 21). The most clownish and ridiculous among them is a white merchant:

...a certain merchant...followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling. He was a large man who wore diamond studs in a shirt front which swelled with the ample paunch underneath, and each time the blond swayed her undulating hips, he ran his hand through the thin hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his

belly in a slow and obscene grind. This creature was completely hypnotised. (Ellison 20)

Grotesque images like loose lips, bald head, over-sized body, pot-belly, and a clumsy look pervade the account of the merchant. The scene of the Battle Royale resembles a carnival ground with its festive images of eating, drinking, smoking, music, dance, eroticism, and busy, noisy crowds. An interesting aspect of the scene is its focus on the body's lower parts, on its eruptions, protrudings, and also its fluids. The blonde's belly and breasts, the black fighters' sweat, blood, and phallic erections, and the merchant's paunch are instances. Grotesque realism degrades, unmask, and uncrown objects by reducing them "to the material bodily level of food, drink, sexual life, and the bodily phenomena linked with them" (*Rabelais* 309).

The boxing contest, arranged to entertain the sadist whites, is ritualistic in form. The black boys are forced and ordered to get into the boxing ring. Blindfolded, they fight fiercely among themselves, their bodies all soaked in sweat, their mouths filled with blood and saliva. Amused and delirious, the white crowd yells and shouts to cheer them and goad them on. The scene has all the trappings of a carnival street fight in which, as a rule, both the victim and the perpetrator are derided and degraded. The boxing contest is a metaphorically powerful exposition of the social evil of racism; it mocks both the white racists and their black victims.

The distribution of the prize money to the young boxers, with which the Battle Royale ends, is grotesquely ceremonial. Coins are thrown on to an electrified rug. With their dark, slippery, perspiring bodies, the boys stampede forward, pulling, pushing, falling, crawling, and rising, to pick the coveted coins “ignoring the shock by laughing” (Ellison 27). The grotesquery reaches its climax and laughter booms through the ball room again, when one of the boys receives a shock from the rug and takes to flight:

I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies. When he finally rolled off, his face was gray and no one stopped him when he ran from the floor amid booming laughter. (Ellison 27)

The accent on laughter that erupts from the grotesque body is a notable aspect of the scene. The laughter motif is, in fact, repeated in the scene. The boys ignore the electrified rug, laughing; when the shocked boy runs off, there is booming laughter. Laughter has a transformative potential. When the Battle Royale begins the black boys are terrified at the sight of the white ensemble. But, when it ends, they are fearless enough to jump on the rug, ignoring the risks involved. The Invisible Man’s assertion that “I discovered that I could

contain electricity” (Ellison 27) is of significance in this context. It is this discovery, this recognition of his own capabilities that propels him to laugh and behave like a clown and participate in the game. Laughter has always been an effectual force in human affairs. Bakhtin comments:

Laughter was as universal as seriousness; It was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies. It was the world’s second truth extended to everything and from which nothing is taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter. (*Rabelais* 84)

The idea that laughter has the power to transform and turn things upside down is reinforced in the incident of the Invisible man grabbing at the leg of the chair occupied by a white man named Colcord, who “owned a chain of movie houses and entertainment palaces” (Ellison 28). The Invisible Man feels that it was “such an enormous idea to topple him upon the rug” (Ellison 28). When the Invisible Man catches hold of the chair, laughing, Colcord, perhaps, sensing the black boy’s hidden motive, rises from it, laughing uproariously, too. The black Invisible Man takes possession of the chair and the white Colcord gives it up. Symbolically, both the gestures denote change, and, significantly enough, both the gestures are accompanied by laughter. Interestingly, the incident is also an instance of carnivalesque uncrowning, of

turning things upside down. Subsequently, the Invisible Man who now looks utterly grotesque, with a mouth full of blood and saliva which he occasionally swallows and with a body completely exhausted, makes his speech on the theme of humility before a black- white audience laughing loudly and incessantly. Some of the whites are totally indifferent; some mock and ridicule him; some angrily interrupt and interrogate him when, through a slip of tongue, he says 'social equality' in place of 'social responsibility.' Humility and discipline have from times immemorial been used by officialdom to check and control the subaltern and the non-dominant. Carnival, as Bakhtin sees it, invariably subverts this official practice. When read in this light, the humility speech scene seems designed to subvert the white racist insistence on unwavering humility and discipline on the part of the blacks. As is well- known, the history of blacks in America is full of instances of the brutal punishments like lynching meted out to the blacks who were adjudged rebellious. The Battle Royale reconstructs the history of the lynching of blacks who lived in the Jim Crow South. Degradation of suffering, victimhood, and fear is an important feature of the carnivalesque. In keeping with this, Ellison's treatment of lynching is mock-ritualistic; it tells us how lynching had become a public spectacle, a carnival of atrocities. Eric. J Sundquist says:

Sometimes openly advertised as "Negro barbeques," lynchings up through the 1930s were frequently marked by large crowds,

carnavalesque festivity, and the collection of souvenirs amidst a sacrificial atmosphere—indications that the moral enormity of the crimes had been effaced by their absorption into the local culture of ingrained racism, where the difference between those who carried out murder and those who condoned murder by their witness or their silence might be hard to ascertain. (202)

Ellison degrades the white supremacists' brutality and the blacks' passive acceptance of their own victimhood and lowered status. In his view, the black bodies, however grotesque they might look to the whites, have powers enough to bring about their social transformation and rebirth. This black potential is what is shown through the manner in which the black boys circumvent and survive the physical and psychological agonies of the Battle Royale.

Black folk culture has been a particularly valuable resource for Ellison. Carnival, it may be noted, has a robust folk basis to it. According to Bakhtin, folk elements, when used in literature, can function as a means to bring about the reversal of established orders and truths. An episode of note in this respect is the Trueblood episode. The trickster figure, marketplace language, and the carnivalesque 'logic of the opposites' which are markers of folk culture, can be discerned in this episode. The logic of mixing opposites such as the high and the low, the black and the white, the perfect and the grotesque is subtly put to work in the encounter between Trueblood and Norton. The Invisible

Man, when he is a student of the State College for Blacks, is entrusted with the responsibility of taking Mr. Norton, a white trustee of the college on a ride in and around the campus. Rich, aristocratic, educated, and well-mannered, Norton stands for officialdom. His description combines praise and abuse in a Rabelaisian fashion:

A face pink like St. Nicholas', topped with a shock of silk white hair. An easy informal manner.... A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white-man's burden, and for sixty a symbol of great Traditions.

(Ellison 37)

The fusion of praise and abuse is one of the peculiarities of the language of the marketplace. Bakhtin says, "The popular festive language of the marketplace abuses while praising and praises while abusing. It is a two faced Janus..."(*Rabelais* 415). The Invisible Man takes Norton to the Black slave quarters adjacent to the college. Here Norton comes into contact with Jim Trueblood, a rural Black sharecropper. In terms of wealth, lifestyle, social status, and living environment, the two are contra-distinct from each other. Their encounter is, therefore, an instance of the operation of the logic of the opposites. It is a strategy to put them on the same footing, uncrowning the urban millionaire in the process.

Trueblood is a grotesque character representing the lower bodily stratum. He is shunned by both the College and the black community for his violation of sexual taboos. He is a sinner and a transgressor. He sleeps with his own daughter and impregnates her. His family, community, and the church turn a deaf ear to his repeated defence that his action has been a purely unintentional 'dream sin', a sin to which he has been led by a dream in sleep. His wife Kate punishes him by throwing an axe at his face. He still bears the stigmatic scar. Treated as an outcast, he lives with his trauma. Trueblood emerges as a trickster telling the tale of his incest to the whites. The degradingly humorous texture of the Trueblood scene becomes clear when he tells Norton about his surprise that the whites are keenly interested in listening to his story of forbidden sexuality. Trueblood has, in fact, repeatedly narrated it to the 'boss men', the sheriffs, and other whites who have without any qualms whatsoever revelled in its salacious details and even rewarded him with varying sums of money. The black story-teller thus tickles, and plays upon, the white man's submerged erotic sensibilities. Meanwhile, his relations with his family begin to get better. Wisdom and stupidity, heroism and villainy blend to make his personality an odd one. He is an embodiment of the Bakhtinian notion of the ambivalent, grotesque body. His incest narrative and his dream narrative are both subversive. The dream he boldly recounts to Norton also entails a sexual taboo, the taboo of miscegenation. In a dream, he enters his white master's house. When he looks for the door to get out of the

room, he sees a white lady stepping out of a big clock wearing only a night gown. On seeing him, she screams and grabs around his neck. He is trapped. He recalls the experience before Norton: “I am scared to touch her ‘cause she is white...that I throws her on the bed.... That woman just seemed to sink outta sight, that there bed was so soft” (Ellison 58). The Trueblood story hilariously foregrounds the issue of black sexuality and the fears and anxieties, myths and taboos centered upon it in the American racist society. Commenting on Trueblood’s tricksterism, Henry Louis’ Gates’ observes:

In a sense, therefore, one may regard the phallic trickster as a force that is, paradoxically, both anti-conventional and culturally benevolent. The paradox is dissolved in the definition of the trickster as a *‘prima materia*—as undifferentiated raw material from which all things derive. Trueblood’s sexual energies, antinomian acts, productive issue and resonant expressivity make him—in his incestuous liminal moments and their immediate aftermath—a trickster *par excellenc.* (23)

Trueblood is fully aware of his familial tragedy and he sings blues to forget his trauma. He says “I ends up singing the blues” (Ellison 66). Through the twin activities of singing blues and telling stories he transforms himself. In a sense, he is a double victim, a victim of white racism and a victim of his own incest. The singing of blues which express the general

black traumatic experience of racism and the repeated telling of the story which expresses his personal traumatic experiences of incest are in accord with his double victimhood. In other words, he resorts to art to find relief from his traumas. This process is what has been called art's "elegiac function" (Graham 227). Indeed, he is a trauma survivor and his oft-repeated narrative is his testimony to his traumatic incest. Survivors of the Holocaust and of prison torture have made this type of testimony in terms of autobiographies and other narratives as attempts at a closure of their traumas. Shane Graham says:

According to Laub, testimony is a process of 'constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*.' This re-externalisation allows the survivor to reify and affirm the reality of the event and thereby gain some degree of mastery over it... (Graham 228)

Singing and story-telling serve to considerably heal and transform Trueblood. He himself admits: "But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things getting bad, they got better'"(Ellison 68). Imprints of marketplace imagery may also be detected in Trueblood's personality. When he performs before his white audience, he wears a minstrel mask. Besides, he commodifies himself, sells his own image. Baker sees, in this behaviour, an emblem of positive and

subversive moves by American blacks. From a carnivalesque point of view Trueblood's grotesque past does not deny him the right to life. A renewed life is possible through change and self-reflection. In a sense, Trueblood has confessed and purged himself. His liminality is his rite of passage. To a certain extent, his story is the story of a *felix culpa*, of a fall followed by redemption, a redemption which, in his case, is carnivalesquely achieved. Freud, in his *Totem and Taboo* (1913), speculates that taboo-breaking, particularly, incest symbolises historic regression. The carnivalesque, on the other hand, subverts this notion and shows that historic progression is quite possible.

Trueblood's language invites special attention. It is indubitably the unofficial marketplace language. Together with his trickery, his art of storytelling, and his rhetorical skills, Ellison also celebrates his Southern Black dialect with its stupendous ungrammaticality and idiosyncrasies. Trueblood's language is folk language with its variations and divergences from standard official language. This is the language of the Rabelaisian *Gramatica jocose* (laughing grammar) pointed out by Bakhtin. Nicholas Mirzoeff explains:

Carnival favours an aesthetic of mistakes, what Rabelais called a *gramatica jocose* ('laughing grammar') in which artistic language is liberated from the stifling norms of correctedness.

Carnavalesque art is thus 'anti-canonical,' it deconstructs not only the canon, but also the generating matrix that makes canons and grammaticality. (46).

The Trueblood episode is also remarkable for its powerful carnivalesque images of death and rebirth. Destroying the perfect, complete, and ideal body, the carnivalesque celebrates the open body. Ellison disrupts the idea of racial purity and superiority through the contrasting figures of Norton and Trueblood's daughters. On their way to the slave's quarters, Norton shows a photograph of his daughter to the Invisible Man. Exultingly, he glorifies her:

She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet....Her beauty was a wellspring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again... she was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art....A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. (Ellison 42)

This panegyric is evidently a hymn to the whites' idea of racial purity and physical perfection. Nevertheless, it is immediately followed by reminiscences of the daughter's untimely death. The ideal is undone, symbolising the carnivalesque death of everything, however pure and perfect

it might be. In a similar vein, the image of the pregnant body of Trueblood's daughter, however impure and imperfect it might be, serves to indicate the carnivalesque rebirth. The carnival body is never in an attained state of being; it is, on the other hand, always in a state of becoming. It is an evolution marked by a culmination in death and an extension into a life in a new body.

A farcical episode built on images of carnivalesque uncrowning, beating and thrashing is The Golden Day episode. The Golden Day is a "kind of sporting and gambling house"(Ellison 80). It is crowded with drunken black war veterans from a nearby psychiatric asylum and with noisy prostitutes from New Orleans. Their speech and gestures parallel the "loud cry of the marketplace...composed in a parodic style" (*Rabelais* 431). The Invisible Man etches the motley, festive crowd:

The place was already full, jammed with vets in loose grey shirts and trousers and women in short, tight fitting, stiffly starched gingham aprons. The stale bear smell struck like a club through the noise of voices and juke box.... Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher and a politician, and an artist. One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist... sometimes it appeared as though they played some vast and complicated game..., a game whose goal was laughter. (Ellison 74)

Exhausted as he is, Norton asks the Invisible Man to get him some ‘stimulant.’ A little later, Norton falls unconscious in the car. Panicked, the Invisible Man violently shakes him up. He sees his “head wobble grotesquely, his lips parted, bluish, revealing a row of long, slender, amazingly animal-like teeth” (Ellison 76). Thinking that Norton is dying, he goes back to the Golden Day and asks for help. Subsequently, the white man is carried inside. At this juncture, Norton becomes a thoroughly grotesque figure. When he is carried inside, his “head hung down, his white hair dragging in the dust”(Ellison 78) and an amused and inquisitive crowd encircles him. Some loudly call out to him using names such as Thomas Jefferson and John D. Rockefeller, and terms such as the messiah, the great white father, the lyncher of souls, and the trustee of consciousness. What is enacted here is an arrant mockery of the white supremacists. Holding Norton’s head between his hands, a short, pock-marked man pinches his chin “gently like a barber about to apply a razor” (Ellison 79). Norton has been turned into a still, speechless physiological entity, a figure of fun, serving the purpose of a carnival clown. The plight of Norton is in accord with the Bakhtinian vision of the uncrowned ‘king’ becoming a fool. Tilting Norton’s head backward, the Invisible Man, under instructions from the tipsy war vets, pours brandy into his mouth and makes him smell it in order to help him recover consciousness. Norton’s uncrowning gains in carnivalesque effect when some of the vets and prostitutes bear him to the balcony and put him down on a three quarter bed. The women stroke

his hair, touch him, watch him with awe and wonder, and make sarcastic comments about him. One of them obscenely says: "...don't you know that all these rich ole white men got monkey glands and billy goat balls?" (Ellison 88). Bakhtin has also drawn attention to Rabelais' use of erotically suggestive vocabulary for the purpose of debasement. With the image of Norton, unconscious, stretched on a bed, surrounded by a bevy of gossiping whores, his debasement becomes absolute.

Disruption is organic to the carnivalesque world. Bakhtin says: "All order will be disrupted, all social differences erased. Inferiors will lose respect for their superiors" (*Rabelais* 237). The beating of Supercargo by the drunken vets at the Golden Day is an instance of this. The huge, black, "stool-pigeoning, joy killing" (Ellison 82) Supercargo, attendant in charge of the psychotic vets, is generally reticent, arrogant, and authoritarian. With his hawk-like surveillance, he ruthlessly controls and silences them. The crowd has, in fact, premeditated it. The picture of the violent uprising is elaborately drawn. Well-poised, like a panopticon sentinel, on the balcony, Supercargo, the emblem of power, watches the jolly crowd below and sternly shouts, "I WANT ORDER!" (Ellison 83). Some of the disgruntled men rush upstairs to fight him. Supercargo kicks them back. Loud uproar follows as half dressed women and drunken men "hooted and yelled as at a football game" (Ellison 83). Bottles and glasses of liquor are hurled at Supercargo and his face gets

drenched in whisky. The crowd grabs him by his feet and drags him downstairs:

...his head bounced against the steps making a sound like a series of gunshots as they ran dragging him by his ankles, like volunteer firemen running with a hose.... The flesh above his right eye jumped out as though it had been inflated...Men were jumping upon supercargo with both foot...They began throwing cold beer on him, reviving him, only to kick him unconscious again. Soon he was drenched in blood and beer. They threw him upon the bar, stretching him out with his arms folded across his chest like a corpse. (Ellison 85).

Bakhtin's exposition of the catchpole episode in Rabelais's *Pantagruel* is worth noting here. The catchpoles, who represent law and authority, are beaten to pulp. Bakhtin notes the stress on human anatomy in Rabelais' description of the beating. The list of affected bodily organs includes "sprained shoulders, black shoulders, black eyes, crippled legs and arms, injured genital parts" (*Rabelais* 207). Supercargo's maimed body is also described in a similar way. For Bakhtin, the retribution that overtakes the catchpoles has a special import "as far as the seriousness of the injuries and the final aim (*Rabelais* 205) are concerned. Power harms. So, when its structures are demolished, its victims are, as a rule, jubilant. The punishment

in both the catchpole and Supercargo episodes is celebratory and is transformed into festive laughter. Carnival always tempts the spectator to join it. This is what is shown through the shifts in the Invisible Man's attitude while watching the fight. In the beginning, he feels restive, ill at ease. But, when he sees Supercargo's fall and the triumphant fighters jumping up and down on his body, he too, is gripped with a feeling of excitement and joy. He recalls: "I felt such an excitement that I want to join them" (Ellison 84).

Carnivals have specific chronotopes, strong links with time and space. For instance, the bartender, Halley, traces the Golden Day's history. It was once a church, then a bank, and then a prison house. But, it is now a gambling house. Thus, the Golden day forms a chronotope like a marketplace or public square, where a subversive carnival is performed. Its transition from successively being solemn centres of religious, economic, and state control and authority to being a simple folk centre of fun and diversion is symptomatic of the gradual decay or transformation of all forms of authority and officialdom under the impact of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin explains the bond between time and carnival:

Indeed, the ritual of the feast tended to project the play of time itself, which kills and gives birth at the same time, recasting the old in to the new, allowing nothing to perpetuate itself. Time plays and laughs! It is the playing boy of Heraclitus who possesses supreme power in the universe ("domination belongs

to the child”) The accent is placed on the future; Utopian traits are always present in the rituals and the images of the people’s festive gaiety. (*Rabelais* 82)

This carnivalesque notion of time with its transformative dynamics is what informs Golden Day’s chequered chronicle of change. It is reinforced through the Invisible Man’s words that “the Golden Day had once been painted white; now its paint was flaking away with the years, the scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down” (Ellison 201).

Parody is indispensable to the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, all parodical recreation is intended to produce festive laughter.

Parodies were not formal literary and negative satires of sacred text or of scholarly wisdom; they merely transposed these elements into the key of gay laughter, into the positive material bodily sphere. Everything they touched was transformed into flesh and matter and at the same time was given a lighter tone. (*Rabelais* 83)

Rabelais’ parody of the French academy, Sorbonne, in *Gargantua* is rife with forceful mockery. Bakhtin comments that “The Sorbonnite dummy is mocked”(Rabelais 217). The Sorbonnites don “royal robes and pompous academic gowns... in which they masquerade as heralds of divine truths”(Rabelais 217). Mocking their enormous sartorial and intellectual

vanities and affectations, their authoritarian ways, and their hollow official rhetoric, Rabelais disrobes them. To a certain extent, the Black College in *Invisible Man* is a miniature analogue to Rabelais' Sorbonne. In fact, the college is a parody of Tuskegee University. The vaunted official ideology and mission of empowering blacks through education is subverted by exposing the hypocrisies of the authorities and associates of the college. The white trustee Norton, the black president Dr. Bledsoe and the blind chief guest Rev. Homer A. Barbee are all debunked. Norton is degraded at the Golden Day. The Horatio Alger success theory is vehemently interrogated through a mock-crowning of the officials present on the occasion of the Founder's Day celebrations:

Here upon this stage the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God's own acting script, with millionaires come down to portray themselves; not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves, these virtues concretely! Not the wafer and the wine, but the flesh and the blood, vibrant and alive, and vibrant even when stooped, ancient and withered. (Ellison 111)

Rev. Barbee is portrayed in a grotesque light. He is "a man of striking ugliness, fat with a bullet-head set on a short neck, with a nose much too wide

for its face, upon which he wore black-lensed glasses” (Ellison 117). He makes a very lengthy speech on the history of blacks in America and of the college. He recalls the founder’s legendary life, lauds his efforts to empower blacks through education, and reminds the students of the importance of following in the founder’s footsteps. He is unaware of the dichotomy between his “vocal drama” (Ellison 123) and the college’s current degenerate condition which is symbolised by its founder’s, bird-soiled statue on the campus. In actuality, he is a carnivalesque fool acting wise before the audience. It is significant that he is, at this point, called “a black little Buddha” (Ellison 118). With “his black face and his dark garments dividing his head from his body” (Ellison 118) his image acquires a touch of grotesque dismemberment, too. His speech represents official rhetoric. Carnival, as has already been mentioned, is opposed to all forms of officialdom which “looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present” (Rabelais 9). In the Founder’s Day scene, Barbee, too, undergoes a certain amount of symbolic punishment. After his speech, he, being blind, struggles to move from his position. Blindness seems to be his scourge. In his manners and speech, he is like Rabelais’ Janotus de Bradmardo, a senior faculty of the Sobornne. Janotus comes to advise the young Gargantua who has stolen the bells of Norte Dame Cathedral. He tries to persuade Gargantua to return the bells. To this end, he delivers a long-winded, solemn, scholarly, moralistic speech. Janotus is invariably a caricature; so is Barbee.

Dr. Bledsoe is a parody of Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee University. He is nicknamed 'Old bucket-Head' by the students. Ironically enough, he is black. He is bald, wrinkle-headed, wealthy, and influential. To his students, he is a *bête noire*, eternally generating fear among them. Even his glance carries a threat for them. Before the whites, he conducts himself putting on a mask of humility and servitude. His minstrel mask, however, is quite unlike Trueblood's in that his is geared to purely selfish gains, whereas Trueblood's is a sheer survival strategy. At the same time, he struts among his black students, aping the whites, wearing the white mask. Autocratic, overbearing, and vicious, he penalizes them even for negligible mistakes and aberrations. He expels the Invisible Man for inadvertently taking Mr. Norton to the black slave quarters and the Golden Day and causing him discomfiture. He serves his selfish interests by impressing the whites with his "Live-a-Humble" (Ellison 106) philosophy. Power alone is his end. During the Founder's Day celebrations, he approaches the white guests with enormous awe and veneration. In order to gratify their sense of superiority, he refuses to eat with them and even to sit down with them. He prefers to stand beside them holding his hat in his hand. Later, he tells the Invisible Man that in the white world "I had to act the nigger" (Ellison 143) and that, at college, "I am still the king..." (Ellison 142). When he senses in the Invisible Man, who has seen through his swindler mask, an urge to expose him to the whites, he cautions him threateningly: "This is a

power-set up, son and I am at the controls....When you buck against me, you are bucking against power, rich white-folks' power, the nation's power" (Ellison 142). With his meek obsequiousness before the whites and his over-arching arrogance before his black students, he seems to the Invisible Man to be a ridiculously mean and small black man with an over-sized body.

The story of Bledsoe's success, however, is invested with a strain of the grotesque. This is done through an account of the antecedents to his ascension as President of the college. He comes to the college as a meek, barefoot slave boy and is given the job of feeding slops to the hogs. Impressed by Bledsoe's hard work, the founder of the college later makes him an office boy. Climbing up the administrative ladder, he eventually becomes the President of the college. The Invisible Man, who is familiar with the well-known story, de-pedestals and puts him in the realm of the carnivalesque through his caustic comment that "he made himself the best slop dispenser in the history of the school" (Ellison 116). Bledsoe has been cast in the mould of a carnival king first crowned and then uncrowned. The pattern of 'majestic kings' being transformed into "comic monsters" (*Rabelais* 213) is adumbrated in the contrastive images of Bledsoe as both 'king' and the 'best slop dispenser.'

After his expulsion from the college, the Invisible Man makes his picaresque journey from the South to the North, eventually arriving in New York. It is, in a sense, a carnivalesque transit from order to disorder,

beginning unexpectedly and avalanching into a series of startling and edifying experiences for the Invisible Man. The Paint Factory episode is one of the many eye-openers to the Invisible Man. He finds a job in a paint factory named Liberty Paints. When he enters the factory, he hears the announcement “KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS” (Ellison 196) inscribed on an electric signboard. The inscription stands the white world on its head, humorously subverting its obsession with racial purity. The implication obviously is that the notion of racial purity is only skin deep, based on skin colour and is marketed and socially entrenched in terms of discourses. In the factory, the Invisible Man is sent to work as an assistant to a supervisor named Kimbro from whom he learns that the focus of the factory is on manufacturing optic white paint for the government. Giving instructions on how to mix a few drops of a black substance with a bucketful of white paint so as to make optic white, Kimbro says that it should be “as white as George Washington’s Sunday -go- to-meetin’ wig and as sound as the Almighty dollar! That’s paint.... that’ll cover just about anything” (Ellison 201-202). The motif of the white world’s obsession with white as the ideal and the pure is reiterated here. The gulf between its religiosity and its Mammon worship, and its subtle engineering and manipulation of the black minority to set off and glorify itself are laughed at and subverted. Even the great George Washington is de-crowned. The notion of racial purity and superiority is a product, a construct manufactured and traded about by the white world.

The old black man, Lucius Brockway also adds to the carnivalesque tenor of the factory episode. An employee of Liberty Paints, who controls the boilers in the basement, he is the invisible Man's second supervisor. The association of the 'basement' with these two Blacks gains in significance in the context of its repeated use, in the novel, as a carnivalesque image, an image suggesting the Bakhtinian downward movement and the topographical lower bodily stratum. Brockway is a grotesque figure, aged, diminutive, and high-pitched in voice. The description of his presence in the basement may be noted:

It was a deep basement....The man who moved out of the shadow...was short, wiry and very natty on his dirty overalls....I saw his drawn face and the cottoning white hair showing beneath his tight, stripped engineer's cap.... he was barely five feet tall, his overalls looking now as though he had been dipped in pitch. (Ellison 207)

Brockway represents the Bakhtinian material bodily lower stratum. His manners are intriguing and he speaks with authority like a king of the underworld. He has been with the factory for twenty five years and he takes immense pride in the importance of people like himself to its functioning. He tells the Invisible Man, "We the machines inside machine....I know more about this basement than anybody" (Ellison 218). He brags about his power

and influence at the factory, pluming himself on how he had helped create its motto and been rewarded for it. He tells his subordinate: "I got me a three hundred dollar bonus for helping to think that up" (Ellison 217). He spits and laughs intermittently. His laughter is nothing short of self-mockery, mockery of his own miserable and degraded status as a toiling black worker in a white factory. But, he is blissfully ignorant of it. The airs he gives himself before the Invisible Man and others are a mask to camouflage his own bitterness and discontents symbolically suggested by his spitting. Nevertheless, he serves with fidelity, flaunting in the little importance he has been made to feel by his white higher-ups. He fails to see that the 'bonus of three hundred dollars' is only a subtle strategy to exploit him, to extort the maximum of labour from him. In this sense, he is a fool, a puppet in the hands of his employers. The incongruity between his indecorous spitting and laughing on the one hand and his conceited, self-opinionated, and domineering tone and deportment on the other enhances the weirdness of his personality. The blowing up of the boiler, which results in serious injuries to the Invisible Man, is a blow to his vaunted technical expertise and competence. It amounts to debasing and uncrowning him.

The fight over the workers' union issue between Brockway and the Invisible Man, which occurs a little prior to the boiler explosion, is farcical and carnivalesque. Brockway is rendered all the more ridiculous and laughable figure in the fight. Brockway, who is against the workers' union,

mistakes that the Invisible Man is its supporter. So, he furiously yells: “You two-bit trouble-making, union louse! ... You low-down skunk ... I will kill you. GIT OUTTA MY BASEMENT! *You impudent son ’bitch*”(Ellison 226). This is typical marketplace argot. In the ensuing fight between the two the Invisible Man misconstrues that Brockway has stabbed him with a knife and strikes back. Subsequently, on learning that Brockway has only bitten him with his artificial teeth which comes off during the fight, he has a hearty laugh. The image of the old man frantically looking for his ‘plate of false teeth’ is inordinately grotesque and laughter provoking:

With a shamed frown he opened his mouth... a blue flash of shrunken gums. The thing that had skittered across the floor was not a knife, but a plate of false teeth.... The old fool had bitten me. A wild flash of laughter struggled to rise from beneath my anger.... without his teeth some of the hatefulness seemed to have gone out of him...and I heard him grumbling as he placed the plate in his mouth. Then, wiggling his chin, he became himself again. (Ellison 227-228)

The false plate of teeth is a clear index of the utter artificiality, the illusoriness of Brockway’s stature in the factory. In a sense, Brockway is the proletarian version of Bledsoe. Through their uncritical subservience to the whites and their lack of proper rapport with other Blacks, Bledsoe and Brockway become

contributors to Black suffering. The peculiar nature of the American cultural and economic system is also brought out through the factory episode. Bernard W. Bell's observations are apt here. For him, Brockway and the Invisible Man are "paradoxically both on the margins and at the centre of the economic and cultural power of America" (55).

The Factory scene closes with the Bakhtinian idea of the 'inside-out' logic. During the fight, the forgotten boilers start shrieking. As instructed by Brockway, the Invisible Man pulls the big white valve, but it doesn't stop the boilers. At this moment, he sees Brockway run up the stairs laughing and "his hands clasping the back of his head...like a small boy who has thrown a brick into the air" (Ellison 229). The boilers explode splashing all the white paint inside the furnace on the Invisible Man's body as in 'a bath of whiteness' (Ellison 230).

The paint factory and its basement are reminiscent of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque images of death and rebirth. The image of the underworld, Bakhtin says, "contains the past, the rejected, and the condemned, as unworthy to dwell in the present as something useless and obsolete. But it also gives us the glimpse of the new life, of the future that is born..." (*Rabelais* 409). The Invisible Man who is injured and falls unconscious, his body all covered with boiling hot paint is more or less dead and is then reborn. He himself says: "I closed my eyes only to be awakened" (Ellison

231), while under treatment at the factory hospital. With its images of the snobbishly parleying physicians, the fearful and confounded patient, and the therapeutic process, which begins with authoritarian interrogation, the Hospital Scene also becomes highly entertaining. The depiction of the electroshock treatment is darkly comic. The Invisible Man lies in a glass nickel box as though he were a lifeless museum object in a glass case or a corpse in a coffin. His head is “encircled by a piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair” (Ellison 233), as though he were a criminal about to be electrocuted. Among the medical personnel, there is a woman with gold nose glasses and a man with a circular mirror attached to his forehead. The piercing gaze of yet another is also funnily described: “A pair of eyes peered down through the lenses as thick as a bottom of Coco Cola bottle, eyes protruding, luminous, and veined, like an old biology specimen preserved in alcohol” (Ellison 235).

Not only the physicians’ physicality but their conversation is also carnivalesque. They praise the electro-shock gadget as a technological miracle; they gossip and laugh and crack jokes about themselves. Haughtily, one of them even ridicules the public’s negative view of physicians as butchers: “What’s that definition of a surgeon, “a butcher with a bad conscience?” (Ellison 237). At this, they all laugh aloud. Even the Invisible Man going painfully through the electric shock treatment is a spectacle of

amusement for them. Watching his vibrating body, one of them merrily comments, “Look he’s dancing” (Ellison 237).

Ellison’s carnivalesque indictment of the American medical scenario with its arrogance, snobbery, and callous unethicity is evocative of the notorious Tuskegee Syphilis initiative which started in 1932. The government’s professed promise of free treatment for poor black syphilis victims was never kept. Instead, for nearly 40 years they were unscrupulously made guinea pigs for a variety of medical experiments. This was one of the cruellest of racial injustices in which the blacks were insidiously made scapegoats for the purpose of studying the effects of syphilis on the human body. As for the electroshock therapy, its efficacy was also tested on the traumatized black veterans of the First World War. A grotesque event in the history of American blacks parodically lurks beneath the grotesque Hospital Scene. This accords well with the Bakhtinian view that the carnivalesque laughs at history and reconstructs it as a “gay monster’ or a comic monster” (*Rabelais* 272)

Metamorphosed and reborn, the Invisible Man laughs as he comes out of the hospital. Later, he recalls the experience: “It was as though I were acting out a scene from some crazy movie... I was no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such...there was no reason to be afraid....”(Ellison 249). Overcoming fear is one of the principles of the

carnavalesque. And, the Invisible Man has done it. His is now a revolutionary mind in the making.

The eviction of an elderly Black couple from their upstairs apartment on a Harlem street, which the Invisible Man witnesses with shock and dismay, is a remarkable piece of public spectacle. The upside-down logic of carnivals is central to this episode. There are two white marshals sternly executing the eviction. Also, there is on the scene a large, inquisitive crowd standing, as if they were watching some street show. The two white men lugging the chair on which the black old woman is sitting is pure fun. Sitting on the chair like a warrior, tying a handkerchief around her head, and wearing a man's shoes and heavy blue sweater, she resists them with both her fists. The couple's household belongings are all violently thrown out. In the resulting pile on the pavement, the Invisible Man sees a curious medley of objects like an Ethiopian flag, a card with silvery letters which reads 'God Bless Our Home', a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, several badly cracked pieces of delicate china on a pillow, the yellowing newspaper portrait of a huge black man with the caption, 'MARCUSE GARVEY DEPORTED', a set of cuff links, brass rings, and a celluloid baseball scoring card and a number of other objects. These objects constitute a parody of what Bakhtin calls 'swabs.' For Bakhtin, swabs are objects used by young Gargantua to wipe his leaky anus. These objects include household articles such as blankets, furniture, handkerchief, jewelry, plants, and leaves. Gargantua's gesture is obviously a gesture of

debasement. For, he uses the objects for a base purpose for which they are definitely not meant. Significantly enough, his gesture also entails a downward movement, a movement from top to bottom. Bakhtin observes:

The transformation of an object into a swab is essentially its debasement, uncrowning and destruction....having reappeared in bizarre sequence, the object is evaluated in accord with its efficacy as a swab, completely apart from its original function. This new standard invites the reader to look at the object in a different light....In this process the object's form, material and size are reconsidered....What actually matters, however, is ...the choice of swabs.... this choice is not merely capricious; it has its own logic. (*Rabelais* 372)

To the poor black couple, their belongings are really precious. But, the white marshals transform them into dirty, worthless stuffs by hurling them out and making a garbage-like heap of them on the pavement. In this sense, Ellison's 'swab' imagery has a carnivalesque logic. The marshals are not only racist but also instinct with levity and indiscriminateness. As such, their action is also a symbolic uncrowning of pro-black leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Marcuse Garvey, of Ethiopian Nationalism, of Chinese culture and communism and of even God, faith, and family. The ideals and hopes, in which the blacks have over the decades been persuaded to repose their faith,

are looked askance at and contested. Religion comes in for particular ridicule in the Eviction Scene. The black woman panics when one of the marshals comes out of the apartment with her cherished Bible haphazardly deposited right in the midst of other articles. Screaming furiously, she rushes up the staircase, grabs it from him, and pleads with him to let her go inside to pray. But, he stalls her and in the ensuing row he pushes her down and she falls backward with her Bible. Bringing what is exalted down to the level of earth or underground is tantamount to uncrowning. This is what happens to the old woman's Bible.

With the old woman's fall, a sudden change comes over the crowd that has been watching everything in dead silence. A woman in the crowd, pointing toward the white culprit, shouts, "Get that paddie sonofabitch....The filthy brute (Ellison 274). Others promptly join her. Yelling, abusing and cursing the marshals, they are up in arms to retaliate. All of them, including the children, are now totally fearless and turn violent. Their earlier regret that they have none to lead them has now found its answer in the shape of a woman. The scene is plainly reminiscent of the marketplace with its vibrancy, furore, and folk speech, its 'cries.' This transformation of the Black commonality is significant, since it brings everything upside down. When the marshal threatens them with a gun they become more enraged and stomp upstairs, undaunted. Eventually, they drag him down and punch him left and right. His debasement is climaxed with a woman venting her wrath on him

and a boy wrenching his snappy hat and wearing it himself. The Invisible Man later reconstructs the scene:

I saw a woman striking with the pinpointed heel of her shoe, her face a blank mask with hollow black eyes as she aimed and struck, aimed and struck, bringing spurts of blood, running along beside the man who was dragged to feet now as they punched him gauntlet-wise between him. Suddenly I saw a pair of handcuffs arc gleaming into the air and sail across the street. A boy broke out of the crowd, the marshal's snappy hat on his head. The marshal was spun this way and that, then a swift tattoo of blows started him down the street. I was beside myself with excitement. The crowd surged after him, milling like a huge man trying to run in a cubbyhole—some of them laughing, some cursing, some intently silent (Ellison 280).

The system of law and order is turned upside-down here. Embedded in the scene is a carnivalesque reversal of authority. The scene is reminiscent of the punishment of the Rabelaisian catchpoles in *Pantagruel*. The crowd breaks the unjust Jim Crow law. The implication seems to be that when there is unjust dispossession and denial of rights, the only remedial option is to break the law. Perhaps, there lurks in the image of the violent Black mob in the scene the idea contained in the statement, "Break the law" (5) made in his

essay “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau who was an uncompromising opponent of slavery. It may be useful to keep in mind here that the eviction, by means of force and threats, of blacks from towns and cities was, in the past, a routine thing in racist America. The irony in the carnivalesquely projected Eviction Episode is directed against this racially rooted cleansing of the blacks to suit the convenience of the whites.

Parody is a device repeatedly used in *Invisible Man*. The Brotherhood, which has a mixed membership of blacks and whites, is an organization parodying the American Communist party. The Invisible Man joins it as member. Its district offices have a gothic appearance. It is in a debasing tone that the Invisible Man later records his initial impressions of it:

The district offices were located in a converted church structure, the main floor of which was occupied by a pawnshop, its window crammed with loot that gleamed dully in the darkened street. We took a stair to the third floor, entering a large room beneath a high Gothic ceiling. (Ellison 360)

The Brotherhood is, in reality, a wealthy power-structure on its own, and its watchwords are “ideology and scientific terminology” (Ellison 306), terms which are strikingly repeated time and again in the novel. Its members live a double life, simple in public but luxurious in private and its leaders are unwaveringly forbidding and authoritarian. It gives large sums of money to its

fresh recruits like the Invisible Man. It takes delight in showy and pompous parades and processions and in delivering high-sounding public speeches to awaken people to the Brotherhood's anti-racist stance and mission and to the current political scenario. The Invisible Man's first assignment is to make a speech in Harlem on the occasion of a public meeting. The impromptu speech impresses the public but, since its tone does not match the Brotherhood's ideology, he is sharply criticised by its senior members. His speech is seen as being "wild, hysterical...and dangerous"(Ellison 349), and the very "antithesis of the scientific approach" (Ellison 349). According to Brother Wrestrum, "a big fellow of shape and size of Supercargo" (Ellison 350), the speech is "backward and reactionary" (Ellison 350). Later, the Brotherhood decides to train him to speak with precision in terms of science, ideology, and terminology. Brother Jack, the white leader, exhorts him to master the Brotherhood's ideology: "Master it....Don't let it master you. There is nothing to put the people to sleep like dry ideology....Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they'll do what we wish" (Ellison 359). The Brotherhood's hollowness is reflected in his words. Like all ideologies, the Brotherhood's is also geared to the construction of a false consciousness whereby people could be easily manipulated to suit its wishes. The speeches and discourses of the Brotherhood always assume an official, commanding tone and downplay everything instinctual, unorganised, and non-scientific. They teach humility, patience, non-violence, and strict discipline. When the

young Invisible Man becomes competent, Brother Jack appoints him the Brotherhood's chief spokesman for the Harlem district. Nonetheless, he unequivocally warns him:

...you will be under strict discipline to the committee....You must not underestimate the discipline, Brother. It makes you answerable to the entire organization for what you do. It is very strict, but within its framework you are to have full freedom to do your work....You are a soldier now, your health belongs to our organization. (Ellison 360)

To the Brotherhood, any deviation from its ideology and discipline is treason. Brother Jack does not forget to ask the other members to regard the Invisible Man "as the new instrument of the committee's authority" (Ellison 363). This Brotherhood business is the expression the Invisible Man repeatedly and sarcastically uses to sum up its hypocrisies, unfolding, in the process, Ellison's sly, ironic vision of the ideological and operational insincerities of the American Communist party. In fact, the Brotherhood's goal is nothing short of power and it uses young people, particularly young black men, as instruments to achieve it. The Brotherhood is finally degraded through the representation of its leader, Jack as one-eyed, a grotesque image evocative of the one-eyed Ogre of Greek and Roman mythologies. Brother Wrestrum is depicted as being prodigiously jealous. It is important to note that to the

Invisible Man, when he is accused of opportunism, Wrestrum appears to be a 'clown'. The Invisible Man ultimately senses that the Brotherhood people with their totalitarian ways and empty ideologies only make better slaves of the blacks. Micheal D.Hill and Lina M. Hill's comments are of relevance here:

Jack and the Brotherhood lack sincerity and true cultural knowledge. Their professed commitment to the people of Harlem stems primarily from a bid for greater power rather than a real understanding of Black Americans' struggle. (124).

A similar mockery of Black Nationalism can be discerned in the portrayal of Ras the Exhorter who is also known as Ras the Destroyer. These nicknames, which he earns on account of his overriding political rage, are in conformity with the popular practice of nicknaming, a practice liberally resorted to by Rabelais as an auxiliary to his carnivalesque mode. Ras, who is proud of his nicknames, is a caricature of the Jamaican born Black-nationalist Marcuse Garvey. His antagonism towards the whites and the Brotherhood turns him into a violent political figure. Like the Brotherhood, Ras also has his eye set on acquiring power in Harlem. He tells the Invisible Man that "We organise—organisation is good—but we organise Black. BLACK!" (Ellison 373). Violence is his prime weapon and he even attacks those young blacks who show an inclination toward racial reconciliation. He is described

as “a short, heavy figure as wide as a lobby...with a knife” (Ellison 370). With shortness combined with a ponderous obesity he becomes supremely grotesque. When he patrols the riot-torn streets of Harlem in his gaudy, odd attire, he certainly takes on the proportions of a buffoon. He emerges on the street on a big, black horse with his entourage of supporters armed with sticks, clubs, shotguns, and rifles. The Invisible Man recalls his image:

A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem... (Ellison 556)

A black knight on horseback and in ethnic wear, who comes as a saviour of the blacks in distress, he represents those who travel back in time, who refuse to be assimilated into the dominant WASP culture, who reject the American melting pot theory. Ras is, in fact, a champion of black cultural heritage and of black identity politics. But, carnival, as Bakhtin considers it, is opposed to everything that doesn't keep temporal pace and look optimistically ahead into the future. Hence the featuring of Ras, the upholder of tradition, as a grotesque anachronism. His racial intolerance also comes in for satire since it is at bottom identical with white racist officialdom. According to Bakhtin, “an intolerant, one-sided tone...is characteristic of official culture” (*Rabelais* 73).

This, invariably, is Ras's tone. In a fight, the Invisible Man, who is actually Ras's target, spears him, mortally ripping and locking his cheek. The incident parallels the carnivalesque act of punishing or terminating the representatives of 'old truth' in its various forms. Ras persistently negates racial mixing and rejects all possibilities of a happy black-white compromise and rapport. Ellison, on the other hand, inclines in the direction of eclecticism and assimilation. He is sceptical of the Black Nationalists' dream of a return to African black culture and tradition and of a separate black nation-state. Viewed from this perspective, Ras's annihilation by the Invisible Man is what Bakhtin calls the "gay funeral... of old power and old truth" (Ellison 99).

The Sambo doll episode is notable for the prominence of its marketplace imagery. The sale of Sambo dolls by Brother Tod Clifton on the Harlem street is a mock- ritualistic performance. Clifton, a young black, who is a member of the Brotherhood, is a friend of the Invisible Man. One day, he mysteriously turns up in the street, advertising and displaying Sambo dolls before a crowd. Like a street vendor, he loudly calls out to attract attention and eloquently explains the unique features of the commodity made of cardboard. The scene, where the Invisible Man is also an onlooker, gains in gaiety, when Clifton makes a Sambo doll dance by carefully pulling the string attached to its back. To the accompaniment of the doll's dance, Clifton sings, too, praising the dancer: "*He's Sambo, the dancing doll....He'll make you*

entertained....Shake him, shake him, you cannot break him....”(Ellison 432)The Invisible Man describes the doll:

A grinning doll of orange- and- black tissue paper with thin flat cardboard disks forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face...seeing the doll throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public... (Ellison 431)

With his funny doll, his delightful puppetry, and with the humour and innuendo of his marketplace language , Tod Clifton is an emblem of self-mockery. The Sambo doll is but a racial stereotype. To the white Americans, blacks have always been Sambos, a foolish, clownish, irresponsible, and malleable people. Clifton purposefully uses the doll as an apologue of black life in a white supremacist society. Before the crowd on the street, Tod Clifton is not just a carnival hawker, but a carnival clown as well. Tony Tanner rightly observes: “Tod Clifton...who suddenly drops all Party works makes himself a parody Negro. Tod becomes a street-hawker in Harlem, mongering self-mocking black dolls” (86), Clifton drops out of the Brotherhood on realising that he is but a political instrument in its hands. It is

this self-recognition that leads to his carnivalesquely concealed protest in the form of a debasing street show. It is a transgressive act, too. His cries and announcements become important when seen in the light of Bakhtin's vision of such marketplace behaviour:

These announcements have nothing in common with naive and direct practical advertisements. They are filled with popular festive laughter. They toy with the objects that they announce and they include in this free game of all the sacred and exalted topics that they can fit into their oratory...that special marketplace atmosphere in which the exalted and lowly, the sacred and profane are levelled and are all drawn into the same dance. Such have always been the announcements at the fair....Popular advertising is always ironic, always makes fun of itself into a certain extent. (Ellison 160)

Clifton is shot dead by the police for his impertinence. His actions and his death are moments of epiphany for the Invisible Man who speculates: "Why should a man deliberately plunge outside history and peddle an obscenity?" (Ellison 438). The Invisible Man's meditations on history and the historian are worth noting in this context:

...history records the patterns of men's lives...All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But

not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?. (Ellison 439)

Popular festive imagery is pivotal to the Zoot-suit Scene. Images like masks, disguises, and outlandish costumes are symbols of protest and transition. Turning everything upside down by means of such imagery, carnival constructs a visual panorama. After Clifton is shot dead, The Invisible Man sits forlorn on a subway platform. He then sees three young zoot-suiters walk down the platform. Their apparel, speech, gestures, and gait cast a spell on him. He describes their visual impact on his mind:

What about these three boys, coming now along the platforms, tall and slender, walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot for summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above

their conked hair?I stared as they seemed to me to move like dancers in some funeral ceremony, swaying, going forward their black faces secret...they were men outside of historical time... men of transition whose faces were immobile... who knew but they were the saviours, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious. (Ellison 440)

The Invisible Man finds even the language and thoughts of the zoot-suiters to be reflections of transition. To him, they symbolise protest and difference, future leadership and salvation. He sees in them a spectacular, instructive, and resolute, 'immobile' blend of mind and body. The vision of a future utopia embodied in the zoot-suiters is of special note here. For, in Bakhtin's view, popular festive images are "precisely related to time, to the future...." They celebrate "the return to happier time, abundance, and justice for all the people" (*Rabelais* 99). Bakhtin adds:

All popular images were made to serve this new historical awareness, from common masquerades and mystifications to more complex carnival forms...it was a mustering of all the long-matured images of change and renewal, of growth and abundance. These images saturated with time and utopian future, reflecting the people's hopes and strivings, now became the expression of a general gay funeral of a dying era, of the old power and old truth. (*Rabelais* 99)

The carnivalesque potential, when it shows signs of protest, is as a rule, contained and suppressed by officialdom. This is what happens in the case of Clifton. The history of racism and apartheid, as is well-known, is full of instances of murder, lynching, imprisonment, and torture aimed at undoing the carnivalesque spirit of the blacks. But, the carnivalesque, which is a latent human urge can never be destroyed. Like a phoenix, it renews itself and is reborn in different forms. This is what is exemplified in the zoot-suiters. It is their sight that enlivens the Invisible Man and helps him overcome the terror precipitated by Clifton's murder. The carnivalesquely depicted martyrdom of Clifton may be viewed as the beginning of, and the call for, a revolt against power centres, a revolt which the Invisible Man, when he later goes underground, reflects on resuming and continuing. In a sense, the zoot-suiters become his lodestar, showing him the way. Stephen Duncombe incisively explores the meaning of the zoot-suit:

The zoot-suit is more than an exaggerated costume, more than a sartorial statement, it is bearer of a complex and contradictory history. When the nameless narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* confronted the subversive sight of three young and extravagantly dressed blacks, his reaction was one of fascination not of fear. These youths were not simply grotesque dandies parading the city's secret underworld, they were the stewards of something uncomfortable, a spectacular reminder that the social

order had failed to contain their energy and difference. (Ellison 158).

Significantly enough, Tod Clifton's funeral is also carnivalesque. Invisible Man arranges it as a public event. There are people on the street soliciting funds for the burial and giving wide publicity to Clifton's murder. His photographs are published in newspapers. A marketplace ambience permeates the street. To make the funeral an imposing popular event, the Invisible Man, together with some others, plans it in an unconventional way. He says that "instead of holding it in a church or chapel we selected Mount Morris Park" (Ellison 450). The funeral procession is rendered into a carnival procession, so as to make an ordinary black man's death pretty visible to the world. This is imperative, for Clifton's death is no normal death. The procession proceeds through the streets and winds upward to Mount Morris Park. All the way, an old black man sings loudly, drummers beat rhythmically, and mourners file in silence. At the centre of it all is Clifton's grotesque body in a 'cheap grey coffin.' The living and the dead are linked in the funeral and with song, and music and sad silence the deceased is celebrated. The zoot-suiters are also among the mourners. For Bakhtin, death is 'a process of renewal.' Clifton's death is no source of lingering fear or passivity. Instead, it begets a metaphoric rebirth. For, Bakhtin "carnival is the true feast of time" (*Rabelais* 255) a feast in which everyone plays a role, absolutely free. Bakhtin observes:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organised in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (*Rabelais* 255)

The mask is also an effective carnivalesque strategy. As has already been pointed out, it is a symbol of change. The mask motif is brilliantly explored through the figure of the Reverend Proteus Rhinehart. When the Invisible Man disguises himself, wearing a hat and a pair of dark glasses to evade being identified by the ferocious Black Nationalists, he is mistaken for one Rhinehart. He now realises that there is someone named Rhinehart who may be of his size and who always wears a hat and a pair of dark glasses, surreptitiously playing a different role from his. Different people accost the Invisible Man differently. Some call him preacher, some gambler, and still some others lover. The real Rhinehart, the Invisible Man concludes, must be a man of masks which procure him different identities in different milieus and places. Indubitably, he is, represented as a trickster, though he remains invisible throughout. Not even once does the Invisible Man encounter the real Rhinehart but he knows that Rhinehart is an actuality. Rhinehart's "world was possibility and he knew it" (Ellison 498). To the Invisible Man, his Rhinehart experiences also constitute moments of epiphany. The truth that

“the world in which we lived was without boundaries” (Ellison 498), dawns upon him. In a sense, Rhinehart becomes an invisible guru to him. He asserts:

You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening. For now the world seems to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. (Ellison 499)

Self- recognition and transformation are notions of the carnivalesque. To grasp their meaning adequately is to learn to live well. The Invisible Man has begun to grasp it. It is significant that he enjoys his accidentally acquired Rhinehart identities. Masking is a game of identities with its basis in the principles of fluidity and flexibility. The Invisible Man now seems trained enough to adjust and make shifts to suit life’s exigencies.

The novel closes with a violent and grotesque episode. A riot breaks out in Harlem. Blacks are on the rampage, looting liquor, clothing, grocery, and other stores. In the police firing, one of them dies and a stray bullet hits the Invisible Man and slightly injures him on his head. Unwittingly caught in the midst of the crowd, he sees even women among the rioters. One of them makes away with “a row of about a dozen dressed chickens suspended by their necks from the handle of a new straw broom” (Ellison 539) and another who is old “with a whole side of a cow on her back” (Ellison 539). A man appears clownishly, wearing three hats and rubber hip boots. His pockets are

swollen with loot and there is a heavy cloth dangling from his shoulders. The street resounds with the rioters' shrieks and screams, and shouts and laughter. There is heavy drinking, too, giving a bacchanalian touch to the riotous scene. One of the most delightful spectacles on the scene is that of a gargantuan woman squatting on a milk-wagon, voluminously drinking beer, and at the same time pouring large quantities of milk down into the street:

I saw a crowd of men running up pulling a Borden's milk wagon, on top of which...a huge woman in a gingham pinafore sat drinking beer from a barrel which sat before her...she bowed graciously from side to side like a tipsy fat lady in a circus parade...she laughed and drank deeply while reaching over nonchalantly with her free hand to send quart after quart of milk crashing into the street. (Ellison 545)

Another spectacular moment comes when the triple-hatted Dupre and a group of men set fire to their apartment building after evacuating his pregnant wife, and other women and children. Both fire and the pregnant body are carnivalesque images. The torching is reminiscent of the 'mocoli' ritual in Roman carnivals. To Bakhtin, fire is a deeply ambivalent image, ambivalent because it "simultaneously destroys and renews the world" (*Rabelais* 165). In his theory of the carnivalesque, even the pregnant body has a deeper meaning. The pregnant body is a grotesque body, a protruding, transgressing, doubling,

renewing body which gives birth to what is new. The womb and childbirth are emblematic of a “generative time” (*Rabelais* 195), time that rings in historical change and progress, ringing out the old. It is on this score that Bakhtin calls the grotesque body the “generating womb” (*Rabelais* 195). He puts it thus:

The drama of pregnant and birth-giving death is enacted in the side street show and the *moccoli* closing the Roman Carnival. The festival of fire revives the ancient ambivalence of the death wish, which also sounds like a wish for renewal and rebirth: die and live again.... During the carnival the ambivalence of being is revived; It is expressed in the ancient, traditional images (daggers, birth, fire). (*Rabelais* 249).

The Riot Scene is carnivalesque; the Harlem street becomes a carnival street where the body with all its urges, desires, propensities, oddities, and peculiarities rides high, despite the iron hands of authority and officialdom symbolised by the cops and firing. The representation of the Harlem riot in terms of funfair and marketplace imagery implies that even violent and destructive events can enfold elements of the carnivalesque. This idea, it may be argued, is what informs the traditional image of Nero fiddling while Rome was burning. Perhaps, the emperor could see the carnivalesque, and the symbolic Roman *moccoli*, in the massive burning.

Carnival is a collective, gregarious event. Once it begins, no one is outside of it. As a participant in the Harlem mayhem, the Invisible Man also

undergoes a carnivalesque rebirth. The police chase him; they want him to show what is inside the suitcase that he always carries with him. But he takes to his heels and accidentally falls deep down into a coal cellar, which is suggestive of what Bakhtin calls ‘the bowels of earth’, ‘the underworld’, ‘the bodily lower stratum.’ From inside the cellar, he shouts out at the police, “Come down and get me” (Ellison, 565), laughing loudly, hysterically. The cellar is pitch dark; nothing around is visible. The Invisible Man bumps against the dusty wall which makes him cough and sneeze. As he fumbles and rummages, he luckily gets hold of the matchbox accidentally dropped down by one of the police officials. For light, he one by one, burns the objects in his suitcase, objects which are reminders of his past. The first to burn is his high school diploma and the second Clifton’s Sambo doll which he had picked up and kept inside the briefcase. The anonymous letter which had warned him against his Brotherhood activities and the slip upon which Jack had written his new Brotherhood name are also burned to ashes. It is at this point that he discovers, from the identity of the handwriting on the letter and the slip, that Jack was the author of the anonymous letter, too. The burning of the articles is a carnivalesque act, destroying the old for the birth of the new. Symbolically, it is the death of the Invisible Man’s old self and the birth of a new one. He is turning over a new leaf. For, experiences have opened his eyes to the realities of life. Laughing he puts it thus: “I now see that which I couldn’t see.... I ‘am not afraid now” (Ellison 570). So he sees his end underground as a beginning,

the beginning of a rebel. He resolves to remain temporarily invisible and writes his autobiography which eventually becomes the novel, *Invisible Man*. His autobiography is his way of rewriting history; it is also one of the ways in which he makes his protest. So, as mentioned earlier, he turns his hide-out into a carnivalesque, flood-lit hibernation place with pilfered power and 1,369 bulbs. He has recognised that true darkness dwells inside people's minds. The sentiments he now expresses are those of one who has grown worldly-wise. He observes: "I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is much against the trend of times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities..." (Ellison 576)

Invisible Man, certainly, invites a carnivalesque reading. It treats its themes using the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Accordingly, laughter, the grotesque body, the marketplace and its crowd, parody, subversion, death and rebirth abound in the novel. Folk features like the trickster, mask, nickname, jazz and blues are also used in the novel. Plenteous intertextuality is also made to serve subversive purposes. The effective use of a variety of factors makes *Invisible Man* memorably dialogic and polyphonic, too. The glory of Ellison's art in the novel, however, lies in the fact that he has wittily exploited the elements of the carnivalesque for a double purpose. On the one hand, he uses them to constitute the predominant narrative mode of his novel. On the other, he points them up as strategies that the blacks can possibly adopt in order to circumvent their racial afflictions.

Chapter IV

Darkness of the Womb

Bama (1958-) is one of the most distinguished dalit women writers in Tamil. Her full name is Christina Faustina Bama Soosairaj. She was born in 1958, in a dalit Roman Catholic family in Puthuppetti. Her grandparents had converted from Hinduism to Christianity. She served as a nun for about seven years. Later, her strained relationship with the Catholic Church made her leave the convent. Bama came to limelight with the publication of her autobiographical work *Karukku* in 1992. Tamil Dalit writing began to acquire prominence in the late 1980s, but soon it became an indispensable and important part of Tamil literature in general. *Karukku*, is one of the first autobiographies written by a Tamil dalit woman. The autobiography was not, in fact, a popular genre in Tamil Dalit writing. In this respect, Marathi Dalit writing was ahead of Tamil since it could claim some autobiographies both by dalit men and women. *Karukku*, in a sense, set the trend of writing autobiographies, especially among Tamil women writers. On these counts, Bama's *Karukku* is now considered to be a significant contribution to Tamil Dalit writing. However, *Karukku* is not an autobiography in the traditional sense. It has some particularly noteworthy features. It obviously tells a story but the story does not have a linear structure. Its protagonist has no name, like the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It has the quality of an oral

narrative. On its surface, it is the story of one person, but this story, on scrutiny, emerges as the story of a whole community. The book is an exposition of not only Bama's life and experiences but also of the life and experiences of the Paraya community, a dalit sub-caste to which she belongs. Some Parayas had converted to Christianity as a means of escape from casteism and its attendant evils like untouchability, oppression, and economic and social marginalisation. Conversion to Christianity, they thought, would also make free education accessible to them. No one who reads *Karukku* can afford to overlook this backdrop of Paraya conversion to Catholic Christianity because it is a significant factor that throws more light on Bama's treatment of this conversion in it. She does not seem to suggest that the conversion had served all its intended purposes and brought the Paraya community all of the well-being and benefits they had envisaged. As such, Bama does not hesitate to put her finger on the ironic situation in which the Paraya converts found themselves. *Karukku* reveals that the Catholic Church in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, is not exempt from its own social hierarchy and so continued to marginalise the converts on the basis of caste and regulate them through certain proscriptions. The book also describes Bama's childhood, her education, and how she became a nun with a view to serving the dalits and how she eventually got dismayed and turned her back on the convent.

A notable aspect of Bama's style of writing is her use of the colloquial language of the Paraya Community. This meant, to a large extent, a bold

departure from the accepted use of literary Tamil, offending the sensibilities of mainstream Tamil writers. She had also to confront the hostilities of her own community which was very unhappy with the way she had projected its life, its cultural and religious beliefs and practices before the public at large. They ostracised her and even wanted her to be ex-communicated. The community's anger, however, did not last long and Bama not only got reconciled to the community of her origin but also became extremely popular within Tamil dalit Community as a whole. *Karukku* won the Crossword Book Award in 2000. It was followed by her novel *Sangati*(1994)and a short story collection *Kisumbukkaran* (1996). *Karukku* has been translated into English and *Kisumbukkaran* and *Sangati* into both English and French. Her other works are the novel, *Vanmam* (2002) and the collection of short stories, *Oru Thattavum Erumaiyum* (2003).

Sangati vividly portrays Paraya dalit life and culture through the perspectives of various paraya women who dominate the novel. Like *Karukku*, it was written in Tamil Paraya dialect. It is a more radical work than *Karukku* in terms of its powerful rhetoric, its boisterous and garrulous female characters, and its vehemence in delineating Paraya life with a sharp eye for detail. When viewed from the view point of its narrative style, *Sangati* turns out to be quite unconventional in its subversion of the generally accepted norms of the novel as a genre. Bama mocks, as in *Sangati*, the oppressive social structures. In all her works, she so etches her dalit characters as to point

up their humanness, to show that they are as human as their oppressors and the rest of humanity. Her implied call is for a recognition of the dignity and humanity of the dalits. *Sangati's* aesthetics, therefore, falls within the general context of Dalit Writing which always affirms dalit dignity. In India, Dalit Literature generally refers to writings by dalits, a community that has over the centuries suffered much and has been exploited and driven to the margins as a consequence of the Caste system. Accordingly, a dominant theme in their works is protest against those social structures, government institutions, and religious persuasions that have been instrumental in their oppression and subjugation. Their works also explore their economic and social backwardness and its debilitating psychological effect on them.

Bama's works perfectly fit into the broader framework of Dalit Writing. At the same time, her works also reveal the distinctiveness of her social situation and experiences as a dalit Christian. This perhaps explains why she is more critical of Christianity and the Catholic Church than of Hinduism and the Hindu upper castes. She attacks Christianity, as she sees it, is guilty of inadvertently endorsing patriarchy by not letting women divorce their abusive husbands. She also indicts the caste-based structure and the practice of patriarchy within her own dalit community. In the light of Bama's view of Jesus Christ and of the Catholic Church in her works, she may be placed within the context of the Dalit Christian Movements that began in the 1970s. Dalit Christians constitute one third of the Christian population in

India. Most of the Catholic Bishops in Tamil Nadu have been non-dalit or upper-caste Christians. Only after several protests by dalit Christians were a few dalit Bishops appointed. Dalits were, as a rule, denied key positions in the Catholic Church. Dalit Christian activists have been demanding that the Church give them equal rights and treat them with dignity. They have also been interrogating the model of Christianity, constructed by upper-caste converts, a model which ignored dalit Christians and their culture.

Ambedkar's life and works have been a source of inspiration for Bama. Her works powerfully and divertingly map dalit experiences. Very often, there is a focus on dalit women's lives and their struggles against hegemonic structures like caste, class, and gender. Her works invariably call for a rethinking of traditional norms and ideas about literary creation. This is implied in the stylistic innovations by means of which she has found a unique voice for herself. In her *Sangati*, it is this voice that has the strength to turn proprieties upside down.

Sangati, as its translator Laxmi Holmstrom calls it, is the "autobiography of her community" (xvi). It unravels the simple and ordinary life of the Tamil dalit paraiya Christian community. Its narrative style is strikingly at odds with the accepted mainstream norms of writing. In this sense, it is also a hilarious critique of the canon. Applauding the extraordinary courage of the paraiya women, Bama writes in her preface to the novel:

“*Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt.”(viii). Indeed, *Sangati* invites a carnivalesque reading, since elements of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque like laughter, grotesque realism, and marketplace language and imagery abound in it. Such a reading enables a clearer view of how social institutions such as patriarchy, caste, government, and religion, oppress dalit women and how these women turn their sorrows into laughter and protest through mockery and subversion of authority and officialdom.

Sangati's narrator is a young dalit woman named Pathima. Her recollections of her grandmother Vellaiyamma Paatti and some other brave women make up the novel. Her narrative maps the folk life and culture of her people. Their passion for proverbs, their faith in numerology, their practise of skills and callings like midwifery, well-digging, grass cutting are all described in humorous terms, exploiting the potential of carnivalesque imagery. The overall picture is that of a community, simple, naive, artless, superstitious, gendered, poor and, at the same time, lively, spirited, and retaining the capacity to laugh and be sportive. This focus on folk life also imprints *Sangati* with the carnivalesque.

Vellaiyamma Paatti with her ageing body and her status as a paraiya midwife represents the Bakhtinian grotesque body and lower bodily stratum.

In Bama's portrayal of Paatti, ageing becomes a positive, not a vexing, state. The ageing body, for Bakhtin, is connected with the regenerative, birth-giving body. Paatti, who lives in Perumaalpatti village, has a wrinkled skin, grey hair, and drooping ears. She is mostly toothless, too. Yet, she takes great pleasure in things like quoting proverbs, chewing betel leaves, cracking jokes, teasing others, and telling stories. Her eye sight is good and she can even pick lice from her granddaughter's hair. She never sits idle at home; everyday she goes out to collect firewood and cow dung; she even goes to the fields seeking seasonal jobs. She is quite old but not sure about her age. When asked she would laugh and say, "I must be about seventy or eighty" (Bama 5). She doesn't fear or fret over, ageing. Interestingly enough, Bama has cast Paatti's ageing grotesque body in a wholesome light. Paatti is robust in body and still more robust in mind. The "decline ideology" (Gullette 6) which is often stressed in discourses on female ageing is disrupted here. Through the image of Paatti, Bama contests the traditional chronological vision of aging.

The projection of Paatti as a skilled midwife is significant, for what informs it is a crowning of the lower bodily stratum. By its very nature, her profession concerns the lower parts of the body, its orifices and fluids. Paatti can handle even complicated cases. It may be a baby with the umbilical cord twisted round its neck, or a baby lying in a breech position; it may be a premature birth or a case of twins. Whatever it is, Paatti does her job, and does it with profound dedication. She never demands remuneration. She is

happy if she is offered her favourite nuts and betel leaves. Her work is with birth and life, with the regenerative body. Bama's celebration of folk midwifery mockingly subverts modern gynaecology with its commercial and profiteering motives and its view of the fast disappearing midwives as a silly, ignorant folk. Bama sums up Paatti's dedication: "once she was sent for, she stayed there for the entire time...right through the labour pains, until the waters broke, the baby was born and the placenta fell out" (Bama 4). Paatti is the very epitome of human concern and selfless service.

Images of childbirth and of the birth giving womb are carnivalesque. There is, in fact, a startling bluntness about Bama's evocation of such images. Expressions like "breaking the water" and "the placenta falling out" (Bama 8), which are grotesque, exemplify this. Pointing out the significance of the scene of Gargamella's labour and Gargantua's birth in Rabelais' *Gargantua*, Bakhtin says that "the episode of Gargamella's labour will appear to us as high and at the same time gay drama of the body and of the earth" (*Rabelais* 224). Bama's midwife Paatti has in her a streak of Rabelais' midwife who rushes to attend to Gargamella.

A scene of importance, built around the image of the birth-giving womb, may be noted here. Pachamuuki is full-term pregnant. One day, while out in the fields cutting grass with a sickle, she suddenly develops labour pains and is delivered of a baby boy. Unperturbed, she cuts off the umbilical

cord with the sickle, digs a hole on the ground, buries the placenta, and goes back home carrying the baby in her arms. In the scene, Pachamuukki becomes a heroic figure, a woman quite out-of-the-ordinary and childbirth an ordinary act. What is subverted is the mystique and misconceptions usually associated with childbirth. The grotesque regenerative body is here used to show the physical, psychological, and regenerative, powers of the dalit women. Pachamuukki's act of burying the placenta by digging into the ground is suggestive of the strong link between the birth-giving womb and the earth's underground. In popular comic tradition, woman has been viewed in terms of the material bodily lower stratum. Bakhtin aptly observes:

She is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. (*Rabelais* 240)

Over the centuries, the womb has been represented as unnatural, mysterious and restless. This vision of the womb can be seen even in the theories of male thinkers like Hippocrates, Plato, and Freud. For them, the womb is purely a biological entity which, as Hippocrates' metaphorically puts it, wanders all over the female body, making women perennially prone to hysteria and other mental disorders. Contrary to this, Bakhtin's perception of the womb is

broader, profounder, and far more positive in meaning. To him, the womb is not just a biological entity. It is part of the grotesque body which is always in a state of becoming, representing renewal, historical regeneration, and progression. Bakhtin says:

Womanhood performs the functions of debasement and at the same time of renewal of life. Womanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover or suiter); she is a foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism. She is the inexhaustible vessel of conception, which dooms all that is old and terminated. (*Rabelais* 240)

Bama's treatment of childbirth is subversive in that it makes the female body and its functions apparent. Childbirth, which is usually seen a private event, is made a subject of public representation. For Bama, childbirth is as natural a process as urinating or defecating. As such, she casts an ironic eye on the institutionalised discourses on childbirth. Bama's accounts of the birth giving body transgress the bounds of linguistic propriety. From a feminist perspective, she foregrounds and publicises the linguistic jargon associated with it. Bakhtin has pointed out that "unpublicised speech" often gains "marketplace publicity" (*Rabelais* 422) and that through *Rabelais* it has found its space in literature, too. *Rabelais*' carnivalesque mode accommodated and

celebrated all types of speech including those considered “alogical” and “nonexistent from the point of view of the literary written language” (*Rabelais* 421).

A noteworthy feature of the Hospital Scene is its carnivalesque degradation of the sacred and the serious. Mariamma, one of Paatti’s granddaughters does not menstruate even though she has grown old enough. Paatti takes her to the town hospital. The white nuns there examined Mariamma’s eyes, tongue, and body. Amused, Paatti watches them and their gestures. Later, she humorously recalls:

Those European nuns in the hospital are as white as anything...They look good enough to eat piece by piece...it’s not just the nuns who look like that. Even the pigs they keep there are as white as anything.... They have got so huge and fat, it’s unbelievable....It seems they are all foreign. And do you think they wander about eating shit like our pigs do? No, these are reared on wheat and milk-powder and biscuits. Then why won’t they be white and not coal-black like ours. (Bama 13)

The analogy between the white nuns and the pigs is an instance of carnivalesque praise-abuse and degradation. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s exposition of the relation between the pig and carnival marketplace is significant in this context: “Amongst the menagerie of fairground creatures, it

was undoubtedly the pig which occupied a focal symbolic place at the fair” (Bama 44). In their book, *Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (1986), they also point out the presence of the pig as a cultural category in historical discourses. The pig is viewed as a low, lumpish, and disgusting beast as it eats its own and human faeces, besides other garbage. Its habits, like rolling in its own dung and in slush and slime are grotesque. To top it all, it has a gargantuan appetite, too. According to Bakhtin, during the carnivals pigs are used for both amusement and consumption. The ludicrousness of Paatti’s comparative vision and language of similitude is evidently designed to carnivalise Christian culture through two of its emblems, the nuns and the pigs. In the process, the Eurocentric construct of whiteness as the best of skin colours and the traditionally venerated ecclesiastical system to which the nuns belong are both debunked and degraded. In fine, the sacred, as Bakhtin puts it, is “transformed to flesh” (*Rabelais* 211). Seen from an ecological perspective, Paatti’s vision also touches the fundamental affinities between man and animal.

The Well-digging Episode shows the difficult living conditions of the young dalit women. To them, life is but the Bakhtinian “grotesque swing” (*Rabelais* 370) which moves downward and upward, backward and forward. Unexpectedly, they undergo carnivalesque deaths and rebirths. This aspect of their life is brought out through an effective use of the lower bodily stratum with its topographical imagery. Mariamma’s story is a poignant example.

Mariamamma joins work with a group of builders who were digging wells in her locality. It is hard labour and as such only young girls are recruited. The work being collective, both men and women have to work equally. But when it comes to wages the women are paid less than men. The nature of the work is such that the men first go inside digging the earth and filling the baskets with stones and rubble. Then the women go down carrying the baskets up on their heads. One day, while climbing up with the basket Mariamma slips and falls all the way down on the well's rocky surface. She narrowly escapes death. The accident is described with a strain of humour:

There were no great wounds to her, but every bone in her body seemed to be crushed. They just rolled her into a Palmyra mat put her in a bullock cart, drove her to the free government hospital.... From her neck to her feet she was covered in plaster.

(Bama 16)

Mariamamma recovers only after several months of treatment. Her survival is symbolic. In the context of Mariamma's accident, Paatti recounts the deaths of two male well-diggers. One of them "was blown up when they were laying the dynamite, and died" (Bama 18). The other "was lifting water from the well with the leather bucket, when the bullocks went mad, dragged him down and pushed him in" (Bama 18). He also died.

It is significant that Mariamma's tragedy is described in terms of the carnivalesque images of the well, death, and rebirth and that a connection is made between woman's body and the cosmic body. Bakhtin's enlightening observations may be noted here:

The Images of the "well", the "cow's belly" and the "cellar" are equivalent to the "gaping mouth." The latter corresponds in grotesque topography to the belly and to the uterus.... The "well" is a current medieval image of the fruit-bearing womb.... Thus, the earth and its orifice acquire an additional grotesque element. (*Rabelais* 329)

Bakhtin has underlined the significance of these images which recur in an episode in Rabelais' *Pantagruel*. The episode profiles the "terrible drought" that occurs "at the time of Pantagruel's birth" (*Rabelais* 329).

Mariamma's survival with her movements downward and upward is symbolic of carnivalesque death and rebirth. The episode also illustrates the poor economic status of dalit women who have to engage even in very arduous labour for their livelihood. The prevalence of gender discrimination at the workplace is also pointed up. A sharp contrast between men and women can be detected in the juxtaposition of stories of the two men who died and of Mariamma who miraculously survives. Bama seems to suggest that women have more of survival potential than men.

Mock rituals are part of the carnivalesque. In the Kuchulu Episode, Bama treats the ceremony of a girl's coming-of-age and its attendant rituals in a mock-ritualistic manner. It is, indeed, a physiological event and at its centre is the leaky female body which is an element of the grotesque body. In the paraiya community it is a collective and festive occasion. Women of the girl's family and of the neighbourhood participate in it. They make a "kuchulu" (Bama 21), a hut like room with Palmyra fronds. The girl has to spend sixteen days inside it, eating and drinking the special food and sweets brought by relatives and well-wishers. The women even engage her in a variety of games like pallaanguzhi, thaayam, and thattangal. Everyday of the sixteen days, they rub her body with turmeric and give her a purifying bath, singing songs. The funniest gesture, however, is that all through her kuchulu days the girl has to carry with an iron rode or anything made of iron when she goes to urinate or to move her bowels. It is her protective charm against evil spirits and peys. On the sixteenth day, the kuchulu is burnt down and the girl comes out in triumph. The fire symbolism of the Kuchulu is akin to the fire symbolism of the Roman moccoli.

The entire episode is carnivalesque. It celebrates the acts of eating, drinking, laughing, joking, singing, and playing games. It also evokes the eerie, weird, and gothic world of spirits and peys. The grotesque body with its openings and orifices and its cycle of growth and renewal is also emphasised. Through this episode Bama celebrates the processes of female body and at the

same time interrogates practices that construct and reinforce gender and its imbalances. The references to the purifying bath and to pey possession, are obviously intended to deride some of the myths associated with the female body.

Patriarchy and religion have traditionally linked the menstruating body with procreation, femininity, and womanhood. In her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler, rightly observes: “menstruation horrifies woman only because it is an abrupt descent into femininity” (237). Menstruation is generally viewed as a form of pollution, shameful and psychologically unnerving to women. Such discourses on dampen women’s full and true engagement with her body and its processes. Bama mocks at these gender discourses. Her mock ritualistic treatment of the Kuchulu festivities exposes how deeply they are rooted in Patriarchal notions of femininity.

The Trial Scene, which ridicules officialdom, is remarkable for its marketplace imagery. Kumaraswami Ayya, who is an upper caste, accuses Mariyamma and Manikkam, a dalit boy of indecent conduct. The naattaamai or the headman of the paraiyas takes it seriously and calls a meeting. The announcement is done with a tom-tom. The meeting is held at night and the men, women, and children of the village gathered in front of the community hall. The trial of the accused begins in this marketplace ambience. The headmen and the elders of the community speak with supreme authority and

seriousness, reposing full faith in Kumarasawami Ayya's version of the incident. In truth, it is Kumaraswami Ayya himself who has tried to molest Mariamma. When she manages to escape, he cooks up a story against her in order to shield his own misdemeanour. At the meeting, Mariamma reveals the truth, but the headmen and other men turned a deaf ear to her. Noone believes her story. However, some of the women in the crowd see through Kumaraswami's guile and sense the truth. One of them, Kaliamma tells the others in a low voice: "This is unjust. Look at the cheek of the mudalaali. He came here as fast as he could and told his fibs" (Bama 23). At this, they begin to murmur and grumble and are silenced by the junior naattaamai who shouts obscenities at them. Then joining hands with him, some of the men also shriek: "Will you she donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you?" (Bama 23) Even Mariamma's father threatens her using abusive words. Mariamma and Manikkam are not only fined but also forced to apologise in public. Interestingly enough, the fine is not equitable. Mariamma has to pay at a higher rate than Manikkam.

With its variegated crowds of men, women, and children, its shouts and shrieks, its abusive language, its mutual recriminations, its varied versions of a single incident, its hostilities, furies, and empathies, and its dominant voices and subdued whisperings, the Trial Scene acquires the trappings of a carnivalesque marketplace. It is a carnivalesque dramatisation of the operational dynamics of Patriarchy in subjugating women and writing

off their voices, stories and truths. This, Bama suggests, is true of the dalit community, too. The male trap is lethal to women and it becomes more so when caste is involved. It is Kumaraswami Ayya's upper caste status that emboldens and enables him to turn the tables in his favour and against the dalit Mariamma and Manikkam. Bama's feminist stance can be better understood when seen in the light of Uma Chakravarty's observations in her book, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (2003):

Dalit feminists have formulated the position of the three-way oppression of Dalit woman: (a) as subject to caste oppression at the hands of upper caste; (b) as labourers subject to class based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and middle castes; (c) as a woman who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (142-143).

Dalit women are oppressed not only by upper-caste men but by their own men as well. Bama exposes and debases the prejudices, hypocrisies, injustices and weaknesses of the representatives of officialdom, of the agelasts as Bakhtin, following Rabelais, calls them. Bakhtin outlines their irrelevance and unworthiness:

This old authority and truth pretend to be absolute, to have an extra- temporal importance. Therefore, their representatives (the

agelasts) are gloomy serious. They cannot and do not wish to laugh; they strut majestically, consider their foes the enemies of eternal truth, and threaten them with eternal punishment. They do not see themselves in the mirror of time, do not perceive their own limitations and end; they do not recognise their own ridiculous faces or the comic nature of their pretensions to eternity and immutability. And thus these personages come to the end of their role still serious, although their spectators have been laughing for a long time. They continue to talk with the majestic tone of kings and heralds announcing eternal truths unaware that time has turned their speeches into ridicule. (212-13)

The women in the crowd who suspect foul play and reject the absolutism and truth represented by Kumaraswami's version of the harassment story are symptomatic of a future renewal of the social order, of the transformation of "old truth and authority into a Mardi Grass dummy, a comic monster that the laughing crowd rends to pieces in the marketplace" (Bama 213).

Dalit women are subjected to corporeal punishments by husbands, fathers, and even brothers. The brutalities often tend toward theatricality and become grotesque public spectacles. Some of the scenes in *Sangati* can show Bama's use of popular festive images like beating, thrashing, chasing,

whipping, and dismembering to degrade patriarchy which systematically uses violence as a weapon to subdue and control the female body. The visible marks of cruelty, which sometimes stay permanent on the body, also torture the victim's psychologically destroying their morale and initiatives.

Thayi's story is grotesque. She is known in the village for her beauty and light complexion whereas her husband is notorious as a wife-batterer. When he beats her publicly on the street, he would "drag her along the street and flog her like an animal, with a stick or with his belt" (Bama 42). One evening, he starts his cruel ritual, beating her with a belt and making a big spectacle of it. Her wails are heard everywhere on the street. She has no chatta or a blouse on and so red weals appear wherever the strap falls on her body. When people stop to object, he beats her harder and abuses her more. The young Pathima, who has been watching it all, furiously asks her mother: "...just because he has tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes?" (Bama 43) Once, Thayi's husband even disfigures her, cutting off her hair and tying the 'big thick hunk of hair' on the doorpost of their house. When asked about it he shamelessly retorts: "It is this whore's hair that I have cut off myself and hung there. Look at her neck, you won't find a single hair left. I cut her hair off to put down her pride" (Bama 43).

Beaten, silenced, and traumatised Thayi lives a grotesque life. Thayi's Torture scene also degrades her husband whose actions are grotesque. Even

the institution of marriage is degraded. Violence against wives is of ancient origin. In his article “Dangerous Words, Provocative Gestures and Violent Acts” Lyman. L. Jonnson observes:

The public shaming or humiliation of women believed to have offended sexual mores was common. Hair cutting was the most common form of retaliation...when a woman was suspected of promiscuity her husband or sometimes her neighbours might cut it off as a punishment. The woman was then predictably subjected to endless insults and humiliations. This brutal ritual was often public in nature and was commonly accompanied by a beating. (146).

Thayi’s case is an extreme example of such violence perpetrated by a man of native jealousy.

Making fun of religion and its rituals is a predominant carnival motif.

In “Contemporary Ritual Milieu” Frederick Bird says:

Religious rituals may be distinguished from other rituals primarily by one feature: they are considered to be a means by which persons establish and maintain their relation to what they consider to be sacred. Sacred realities are here defined as those things which are set apart and revered because they are believed to be extraordinarily powerful and ultimately real. (22)

Carnival is opposed to ritualistic discourses which construct the metaphysical as real and absolute. The Paraiyas in *Sangati* are converted Christians and they observe church rituals. A carnivalesque mockery of this practice takes place in the Puuja episode. On Puusai/Pooja days, normally sundays, the women of the community take their offerings to the church. Depending on the season, they bring “grains and pulses...paddy, maize, millet pulses, sesame seeds, or beans or whatever was growing in the fields” (Bama 34) and offer them to the saamiyaar or priest. On one such day, the women devotees stand in a row, “full of fear and devotion” (Bama 34) and their offerings. The mischievous old woman Bhakkiyam is also there. But her hands are empty. One of the devotees disparages her: “Look at this old woman Bhakkiyam, she doesn’t have an offering or anything, yet she’s got up and joined the others, look, the shameless donkey” (Bama 34). Bhakkiyam just glares at her and moves on in the procession-like queue of the devotees. Suddenly, the tackling of a hen is heard. But noone can guess its source. The women make their offerings, respectfully bowing before the Priest. When Bhakkiyam’s turn comes, she abruptly takes out the hen she has all along kept hidden inside her sari and makes it over to the priest. Flapping its wings the hen begins to squawk and cry noisily. The priest, though embarrassed, accepts the hen. The events that followed are highly farcical:

The entire congregation began to laugh....But, as it flung itself about, flapping its wings wildly, he loosened his hold, terrified

that it would shit all over his robes and everything. The hen dropped down, squawked even more loudly and began to run about in the church. (Bama 35)

The confusion inside the church constitutes a great comic spectacle. Boys chase the hen, catch it, and give it to the priest. Feigning high seriousness Bhakkiyam respectfully bows before the priest. The men burst out laughing and yet a little later they scold the women saying, “Why are you laughing in the church? Disrespectful Donkeys! Don’t you have any sense of what’s right?” (Bama 3)

Carnavalesque laughter is pivotal to this episode. Through it the sacred is mocked. Bakhtin has pointed out that officialdom and Christianity have condemned laughter since “jests and laughter are not from God but from devil” (*Rabelais* 73). He says:

Laughter was eliminated from religious cult, from feudal and state ceremonials, etiquette, and from all the genres of high speculation. An intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of official medieval culture....Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness. (*Rabelais* 73)

When viewed in this light, Bhakkiyam’s carnivalesque prank becomes a prodigiously subversive act. The images of the boys chasing the frightened

squawking hen, the laughing and complaining congregation, the women with varieties of agricultural produce as offerings instantly transform the church into a marketplace. Bama denudes the church of all its sanctity and solemnity. In her carnivalesque treatment, it shrinks into a sheer exploitative institution.

The gutsy old widow, Sammuga Kizhavi, is also a veritable source of laughter in the novel. She has just four strands of hair on her head. She uses abusive language and is quick to pick a quarrel with others. Her angularities have earned her certain names like “Black tongued munde”, “stinking munde”, “wretched munde”, “crazy munde” “stinking evil woman”, and “dreadful woman” (Bama 39). Notably, the terms used are all abusive. This is, indeed, a Rabelaisian technique conducive to the production of humour. Bakhtin observes: “The formation of proper names from abusive terms is one of the methods most frequently used by Rabelais as well as by folk humour in general” (*Rabelais* 460). Sammuga Kizhavi, whose actual name is Shanmugam, has also the nicknames, “Maikkuuzh Kizhavi and Ragi-Kuuzh” (Bama 37), both deriving from her fondness for pure ragi gruel which, when taken with vegetable pickles, is surely “as good as nectar from heaven” (Bama 37). Just as Pantagruel’s name denotes his insatiate thirst, Shammuga Kizhavi’s nicknames denote her inordinate passion for ragi gruel. The erasure of the borderline between a name and a nickname, which Bakhtin notes in Rabelais’ works, can be perceived in Bama’s novel, too.

What makes Sammuga Kizhavi distinctive as a carnivalesque figure is her habit of farting. She farts whenever she is in the company of others. Sometimes, she even holds both the hands of a child, puts them together, pulls them close to her bums, and farts into them. Grotesque in both appearance and gestures, she emerges as a strolling figure of entertainment to the villagers. She looks like a clown when she goes to work in the fields with a cloth pad on her head, a pot on top of it, a spade across one shoulder, and a thermos flask hanging from the other. What adds to her clownishness is the fact that the flask is an old and useless one which the upper-caste Nayakkar Amma had thrown away. Sammuga kizhavi had picked it up from the garbage and removed all the broken glass inside it, making it into a carrier for her favourite ragi gruel. Stylishly, she carries the mock-flask wherever she goes. The entire village laughs and the children call her “Flask’ as well as Flask Kuuzh” (Bama 39).

Rabelais’ folk humour is revolutionary in nature. His carnivalesque mode, as Bakhtin points out, “expressed basically the most radical interests, hopes, and thoughts of the people” (*Rabelais* 138), to a certain extent, this is true of the element of folklore in *Sangati*, too. Some of Sammuga kizhavi’s actions demonstrate the transgressive and subversive energies latent in the carnivalesque. One day, she boldly pulls away the barbed-wire fence the upper-caste Srinivasa Ayya has put up around the well on his premises “to stop the lower-caste donkeys from going there and polluting the water”

(Bama 117). Half-naked, she, then, jumps into the well and bathes. When caught by Srinivasa Ayya she ridicules him saying that the water in the well is salty and bad. She even “spat out a mouthful of water into the well” (Bama 117). On another occasion, she is infuriated when she sees him beat a child for touching his water pot. After a while, when he is away, she goes and pisses into the pot. Spitting and pissing which are organic to the grotesque body are used here for degrading and dismantling casteism. Pathima’s remark that “...it might be a good thing if we had even a handful of people with Sammuga Kizhavi’s guts” (Bama 118) is particularly significant in the context of the paraiya community’s backwardness. Guts alone can revolutionise the repressive system and change the status-quo. Fear only stabilises it.

Diablerie is part of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin contends that the diablerie tradition of medieval mysteries, the parodical legends of the time and the ‘*fabliaux*’, in which the devils are represented as figures of gaiety, expressing the unofficial point of view and the material bodily stratum, and with nothing terrifying or alien in them, has influenced Rabelais. Accordingly, in his carnivalesque mode “the devils are excellent and jovial fellows. At times devils and hell itself appear as comic monsters” (*Rabelais* 41). Bakhtin adds that “the diablerie was related to carnival. It crossed the footlights to merge with life of the marketplace...” (*Rabelais* 267). Bama’s depiction of the paraiya community’s diablerie culture is in accord with the

carnavalesque in the novel. The Exorcism Scene is an interesting example. Virayi, a Vanaan woman is possessed by Esakki's spirit. Virayi begins to behave in shockingly weird ways. And, inquisitive crowds turn up to watch her. Eventually, an exorcist is brought in. He begins the exorcism beating a kettledrum, smearing his ash and kumkum on his forehead, and eating betel leaves. A pot full of olive coals sprinkled over with frankincense and a platter full of beetle leaves, nuts, kunkumam, bananas, incense sticks are right in front of him. Virayi, who sits in the middle of the crowd, her hair spread out, eyes staring at everyone, begins to swirl her head and dance to the exorcist's drum beats. The scene, with its crowd, comic performers, dancers, and such commodities as betel leaves and bananas, resembles a carnival marketplace. In Bama's treatment the exorcism becomes a delightful, collective folly in which the entire crowd willingly participates. Bakhtin says that during carnivals every participant "permits...himself every kind of foolishness and clownery" (*Rabelais* 261). For, they "permitted the people to see the world with 'foolish eyes'" (*Rabelais* 260). The possessed Virayi becomes doubly grotesque when she performs what she is instructed to by the exorcist. For instance, she runs by carrying a stone over her head and she lets him pluck off a thick lock of hair from her head. The exorcist, in fact, is moulded as a carnival clown. The dialogue between him and Isakki's spirit resident in Virayi is a delightful piece of grotesquery. Free from terror and fear, it closes the gap between life and death, between the living and the dead. At the end of

the scene, Isakki's spirit agrees to leave Virayi's body on the condition that she should be offered a chattai/a blouse and a cradle. The scene foregrounds what Kristeva calls 'the abject.' To her, the female monstrous figure is the abject which does not "respect borders, positions, and rules" but "disturbs identity, system, and order" (Kristeva 4). In one sense, Virayi's exorcism celebrates the abject and its powers. In another sense, it also shows how, through rituals and other social processes, officialdom controls and marginalises the abject. Drawing on Kristeva, Barbara Creed aptly observes in her article, "Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection:"

Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual the demarcation line between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. (64)

Linked to Virayi's possession is the honour killing of Isakki through which Bama evokes a momentous phase in the history of the village. Isakki falls in love with a young man of a different caste and leaves her home to live with him secretly in another village. Her seven brothers, who have always loved her deeply, turn too vengeful, seek her out, trick her into the forest, and kill her. They even dismember her body. In Bama's account, the murderous dismembering becomes enormously grotesque, a tragic farce:

They gagged her, tied her hand and foot, thrust her into a covered cart so that nobody could see her, and drove her away into the jungle....They dragged her without even caring that she was a full-term pregnant woman, with one sweep of a sword they separated her head from her body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it.

(Bama 53)

To Bakhtin, dismembering “corresponds to the divisions of social hierarchy (*Rabelais* 351). Citing Rig-Veda, he adds that “this is a travesty of the widespread mythical concept of the origin of the various social groups from various parts of a god’s body” (*Rabelais* 351). Isakki, flouts the divisions and so is punished. Both patriarchy and casteism are mocked through the Isakki event in the history of the village. Events of violence and brutality, as a rule, create a fear psychosis in society. This is comically shown through the fearful impact of the Isakki tragedy on the women of the village. Bama’s suggestion seems to be the paraiya community, particularly its women, should shed their fearful obsession with their gloomy past if they are to survive adequately well. The conversation between Paatti and Pathima throws light on this. Pathima asks: “Why does the pey only possess women, Paatti?” (Bama 50) Paatti replies: “The pey only catches people who are scared. It’s women who are always fearful cowards” (Bama 50). A few years

later, Pathima, who witnesses Virayi's exorcism and hears from Paatti and others more stories about spirits, also says:

As I listened to more of these stories and thought about it all, I was convinced that it was all false.... The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by Peys...I decided then that it is up to us to be aware of our situation and not fool ourselves that we have been possessed by peys. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, we must strengthen our hearts and mind in order to survive. (Bama 59)

In the Ayyankachi Episode, the focus is unmistakably on diablerie. The Ayyankachis are believed to be a wandering troupe of spirits or peys with supernatural powers. They can assume any form or shape and can make themselves visible or invisible at will. In Paatti's village, there are plenty of stories about them. One of them is the story that she tells Pathima about an Ayyankachi leader who robs a woman of all her jewellery. He comes disguised as a neighbouring woman and dupes her into parting with it. The

following morning, the two befooled women start a quarrel, watched by others. But, to everyone's surprise, a man comes, bringing the lost jewellery back. His story is equally funny and weird. When he was watering his fields at night, he happened to see the Ayyankachi's dance merrily with the stolen jewellery. Then, joining them, he too danced, stark naked. While they were in the frenzy of dancing, he attacked the Ayyankachis with his spade. The Ayyankachis suddenly disappeared and got the jewellery. Obviously, Bama renders the Ayyankachi episode in festive terms. Popular festive elements like stealing, disguise, trickery, dancing, quarrelling, and fighting mark it out. Commenting on the popular festive character of medieval diableries Bakhtin says that "it was customary to permit devils (actors) to run loose around the streets wearing their costumes; sometimes they were free to do so for several days before the performance" (*Rabelais* 265). As an example Bakhtin cites the antecedents to the performance of the popular 16th century diablerie called The Mystery of St. John:

The announcement of the performance mentioned that the male and female devils would run loose in the streets ...several days before the opening. The actors disguised as devils...created an atmosphere of unbridled carnivalesque freedom. They considered themselves exempt from the law and...often took advantage of their role to rob the peasants and mend their financial affairs. (*Rabelais* 266)

The Ayyankachis may be thieves or villainous men taking advantage of the credulous, superstitious paraiya community. Nevertheless, in the context of the novel, they are spirits, and like the devils they are on loose with unbridled carnivalesque freedom. Bama's mockery is aimed at patriarchy and its exploitation of popular superstition.

A brilliant use of marketplace language in all its forcefulness and joviality can be seen in the scene which shows the violent quarrel between the newlyweds Pakairaj and Rakkamma. News of the quarrel draws a crowd to watch it Pakairaj, who is drunk, abuses Rakkamma, kicks her on the belly, and drags her along the ground holding her hair. Ignoring it all, Rakkamma spits at him, scoops hand fulls of earth and flings it around and stunts him, and the crowd with a volley of curses and obscenities:

Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard..... How dare you kick me, you low- life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? (Bama 61)

The grotesque imagery of urine, farts, menstrual blood, and leprosy is of significance here. It comprises the lower parts of the body which, according to Bakhtin's theory, usually serve to "debase, destroy, degenerate" (*Rabelais*

151). Bakhtin also mentions that abuses and curses are generally targeted at “representatives of the old, gloomy truth...., of ‘Gothic darkness’, the somberly hypocritical and serious, and the messengers of darkness..... They are the enemies of the new, free, and gay truth” (*Rabelais* 172). Pakairaj is one who belongs to this category of men.

The scene closes, and reaches its carnivalesque climax with Rakkamma lifting her sari up and exposing her lower parts before the crowd watching the quarrel as though it were a merry spectacle. Her gesture is Rabelaisian and she resembles the lady Sibyl of Panzoult who exposes her back to Panurge in *Pantagruel*. Bakhtin comments on the civil farce:

When the Sibyl of Panzoult showed her back to Panurge he exclaimed: “I see the sibyl’s hole”, as the entrance to the underworld was called in antiquity. Medieval legends describe many of these holes in various parts of the Europe. They were believed to be the entrances to purgatory or hell. (*Rabelais* 377)

Carnavalesquely etched as she is, Rakkamma invariably arouses laughter. At the same time, she also becomes an emblem of carnivalesque rebirth, achieved by means of dauntless outspokenness. Her unabashed transgression is intended not only to humiliate her patriarch husband but also to question and debase the very system of patriarchy.

The festive carnivalesque inversion, which Bakhtin sees in Rabelais' treatment of infant Pantagruel and its extraordinary activities may also be perceived in Bama's grotesque depiction of the twelve-year-old Maikkanni. Her actual name is Seyyarani but she is nicknamed Maikkanni because her eyes, naturally, look as beautiful as outlined and decked with mai or kaajal. Maikanni, though a child, is very out-of-the ordinary. She is not dependent on her parents as children generally are. On the other hand, her parents are dependent upon her. She is mature far beyond her age and her conduct and activities blur the dividing line between child and adult. Every time her mother gives birth to a baby, she goes to a neighbouring town to work in a matchbox factory. Back home she does all the household chores. Hers is, indeed, an arduous life. Yet, she has her buoyant spirits. This carnivalesque ambivalence of her personality expresses itself in her leisure-time preoccupations. She runs about the streets, chats and giggles with women and sings to their delight in a voice "as clear as a bell" (Bama70). The image of the bell in the comparison is a popular festive image, suggestive of renewal and rebirth. She also relates to the women her experiences at workplace in such a way as to make them laugh. She loves travelling on board the factory bus and does not shy off fighting the boys when they try to oust her from her window seat. One day, her father beats her for spending one rupee from her wages on ice cream; but she forgets it recollecting the delirious experience of eating it. At the factory, the Maistri Annaachi one day beats her for defecating

outside the factory. Later, giggling and laughing she tells the women of the village about it: “In our factory, they have built a special room which is the shit room. It seems you must go and do your number one and number two only there” (Bama73). Her sense of humour makes the women laugh, too. Maikkanni’s open-air defecation has also an element of the grotesque about it. It denotes the carnivalesque lower bodily stratum. Maikkanni’s participation in the strike staged by the paraiya children and her timely escape from the indecent advances of a villainous man also reflect her extraordinary maturity and competence. Through the image of Maikkanni, Bama puts her finger on how, even in our civilised age, paraiya children are constrained to live a grotesque life, deprived of their legitimate rights. Bama’s construction of Maikkanni in the hybrid image of both adult and child is a carnivalesque crowning of the girl as well. What it wittily exploits is the device of carnivalesque inversion and ambivalence.

Bama’s elaborate accounts of the wedding festivities of the paraiya community acquire considerable importance in the context of the novel’s carnivalesque texture. The community has a variety of rituals and customs associated with marriage. The pre-wedding ritual called parisham is a betrothal or an engagement ceremony celebrated at the bride’s home in the presence of the heads and elders of the family and the community. The bridegroom’s father has to give a sum of money and also other gifts like “a betrothal sari, material for a ravikkai, a bundle of beetle leaves, some beetle

nuts, a bunch of bananas, a coconut, and a parisam money...”(Bama 82) to the bride and her family.

To the paraiyas, the month of Vaiyasi is the month of weddings. There are single as well as group weddings. The drummers play an indispensable role, for paraiyas have traditionally been drummers performing at marriages, funerals and other festivals. Interestingly enough, even the name paraiya is a derivative from the Tamil word ‘parai’, meaning drum. Fully bedecked, the bride is taken to the church in a procession. As soon as the tali-tying initiated by the priest with prayers, blessings, and handing over the tali to the groom, is over the musicians waiting outside the church break into “a loud beating of the drums and blowing of pipes” (Bama 84). Dancing young men join in and the groom and the bride, accompanied by men, women, and children set out in a procession. When this wedding procession reaches the marketplace friends or relatives offer the couple coffee, milk, soda or sherbet to drink and refresh. Subsequently, the procession arrives at the groom’s home, his family and relatives receive them in a traditional way feeding them milk and banana and singing folk marriage songs. A banquet for the wedding guests follows. Again in the evening, a procession with drummers beating the drum, the newly-weds are led to a well to draw water. This ritual is also performed in a gay manner with people standing around to watch. The couple walk around the well, holding each other’s hands and dropping betel leaves into the water: “The number of leaves that fell face down indicated the number of girl children

they would have; those that floated face up stood for the number of boys” (Bama 86). Then, the couple draw water from the well and fill a pot. The groom is asked to lift up the pot and place it on the girl’s hip. These rituals are followed by the oil-ceremony. The bride rubs some oil on the groom’s head and the groom on the bride’s. After this, they take bath rubbing soap-nut powder and pouring water on each other’s body. The bystanders help them.

The paraiya wedding celebrations are in themselves carnivalesque, replete as they are with popular festive symbols and images such as the marketplace, eating, drinking, songs, music, dance, and processions. Bama’s descriptions of these celebrations serve a double purpose. They precisely document the wedding culture of the paraiya community. Besides, they function quite strategically to enhance *Sangati*’s carnivalesque ambience. Bama’s treatment of the wedding rituals is remarkably incisive. It exposes the ambivalence and contradictions fundamental to them. On the one hand, the rituals seem to inculcate the idea of marriage as a happy and egalitarian union between a man and a woman. On the other, embedded in them is also the ideology of women’s inferiority and subordinateness and men’s superiority and dominance. The distinction made between the ‘face down’ and ‘face-up’ betel leaves in the ritual of betel leaf throwing is significant. The ‘face down’ leaves are associated with baby girls and the ‘face up’ ones with baby boys. The idea of female invisibility and subservience and of male visibility and mastery is inherent in the ritual.

Mock elections of kings in medieval carnivals are, according to Bakhtin, a “saturnalian game” (*Rabelais* 105). When viewed in this light, the Election described in Bama’s *Sangati* becomes a carnivalesque mock-election degrading party-politics, the polling system and the government. On the Election Day, the women of Paatti’s village are all out in the street gossiping, cracking jokes, and sharing their voting experiences. Patti goes and puts the stamps on the pictures of all the candidates, making it an invalid vote. Another woman goes to cast her vote because a party worker has given her some money to vote for a particular candidate. He has even shown her his picture. But inside the booth she puts the stamp on two other pictures. The women laugh when they hear Ucchayi’s story. Ucchayi is very old and has a poor vision. Some men come and carry her off to the booth while she is in the act of ‘shitting away” (Bama 72) at home. Sammuga Kizhavi’s lowliness is forgotten for a short while and she is brought to the booth in the upper caste Govalsaami Ayya’s car. After voting, she comes and sits in the car and is ordered out. Adamantly she refuses to get off and shouts threateningly at the party workers:

You made sure of my vote, and now you are going to leave me stranded here, are you? We get no good out of voting for you, so let me have a free ride....Otherwise I’ll speak to all the people in our street and none of the women will vote for your party.
(Bama 101)

They drive her back. Later, everyone has a hearty laugh when she reveals how she has fooled Govaalsaami and his men: “All that Govalsaami did was to give me a free ride. I didn’t vote for any of them, I just folded up the paper just as it was and shoved it into the box” (Bama 101). The parley of the women in the street exposes the hypocrisies, deviousness, violence, and corruption rampant in party politics and the electoral system. It also reveals the exploitation of the poor by affluent politicians who use them “as dice in their own games” (Bama 102). These women also express their displeasure over the lack of unity among young dalit men who unthinkingly allow themselves to be tools in the hands of cunning politicians. Pathima’s moral indignation may be noted here: “...they will never let us unite. They separate us in the name of party, God, priest, caste; they play games with us. And we are like grinning puppets in their hands” (Bama 103).

Sangati is polyphonic and dialogic. Memory is both theme and techniques in its mini-narratives. The voices of men and women who belong to different age groups, different caste and classes make it delightfully dialogic. The narrator Pathima is not just a passive narrator. She is active too as a character. Nicknames like Kaatturaja, Dammatta Maadu, Mocha Mary, Ragi-kuuzh Kizhavi, Big Stomach Kizhavi, Rendupalli, Pachamukkipillai add to the novel’s carnivalesque effect. To Bakhtin, nicknames are praise-abusive expressions deriving from the grotesque body and its gestures. He says: “A nickname can never be neutral, since its meaning always includes an

element of evaluation, positive or negative. All real nicknames contain a nuance of praise-abuse” (Bama 459). In the novel, the women characters sing a variety of songs while working, cooking food, putting babies to sleep, grinding, weeding, transplanting rice seedlings, and harvesting. They are also heard singing at betrothals, weddings, and even at funerals. They even improvise and sing songs about their own men in order to tease each other. The presence of these lively folk songs also makes the novel enormously festive. As Pathima puts it, “from birth to death there are special songs and dances” (Bama78)

Sangati may be a novel about the Tamil dalit paraiya christian community. But, in the ultimate analysis, it becomes a novel about all the wretched of the earth. Its themes and ideas are, in fact, astonishingly varied. And Bama explores them using, predominantly, the mode of the carnivalesque.

Chapter V

Feast for All

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer (1908-1994) is a legend in the history of Malayalam literature. For some years, his works remained rather neglected, without being subjected to the serious study that they actually deserved. Subsequently, there was a phenomenal growth of interest in his works, and an interest which still continues, and he was recognised as one of the most significant, fascinating and socially committed writers in Malayalam. This was obviously by virtue of his unconventional mode of writing, his deep humanism, his prodigious sense of humour, and his unique use of the vernacular, and his humane depiction of the life of ordinary men and women. Witty and pithy, his works are marked by worldly wisdom and an immensely colloquial prose style. His works have been translated into a number of other languages, Indian as well as foreign. Some of his most famous works are *Premalekhanam* (Love Letter), *Balyakalasakhi* (Childhood Friend), *Shabdangal* (Voices), *Pathummayude Aadu* (Pathumma's Goat), *Mathilukal* (Walls), *Ntuppuppakkoranendarannu* (Me Granddad had an Elephant), *Janmadinam* (Birthday), *Vishwavikhyathamaya Mooku* (World-Renowned Nose), *Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan* (The Principal Divine of the Place), *Mucheettu Kalikkarante Makal* (The Card- Sharper's Daughter), *Aanavaariyum Ponkurishum* (The Elephant-scooper and The Golden Cross),

and *Anargha Nimisham* (*The Rare Moment*). In addition to the Padma Shri he was awarded in 1982, Basheer is the recipient of a large number of awards.

Basheer's oeuvre is varied and rich. He lived through the 20th century and most of his works were written and published between 1940 and 1992. He wrote short stories, novels, essays, and autobiographical works. A notable feature of most of his novels is that they are short. This brevity, however, does not detract from their quality as fictional works or from the treatment of the concerns central to them. On the other hand, it makes them eminently readable and invests them with an epigrammatic conciseness. It may even be said that it is this readability in concert with his astonishing humorous style that has expanded, and still does, his readership over the years. His first novel *Premalekhanam* (*Love Letter*) was published in 1943, when he was nearly thirty five years of age and when India's struggle for independence was in its last phase. Some of Basheer's narratives are primarily set within the Muslim Community of Kerala. Nevertheless, it would amount to a reductionist view if one looks at Basheer as a writer who is concerned with this minority community and its ways of life alone. A careful reading of his works would reveal his deep concern with human issues in general. Kerala Muslim life and culture was a less explored terrain in the mainstream Malayalam literary tradition. Besides, the meagre representation of the Muslim community in the Malayalam literature of his times did not offer a true picture of the community in all its aspects. Basheer was aware of this lacuna. Being an

insider, Basheer knew the community in and out; he knew its weaknesses and strengths. As such, he has portrayed it effectively, bringing out its social and cultural life, its beliefs and attitudes, and its economic and educational backwardness and the problems arising out of it. Basheer has been critical of the community's imperfections, too. Basheer's realism is unmistakable and it can be seen even when his theme is supernatural as in the work, *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1968) which later became one of the most popular Malayalam films, with the same title. In his novels, everyday experiences and incidents of life are so captured as to make the readers empathise and feel one with the characters involved in them. In this sense, the readers become active participants in the world of his novels. This ability to turn everyday events into engaging stories is a unique feature of Basheer's style of writing. In some of his works, Basheer has intensely employed autobiographical elements.

Basheer's life was one of political and social activism. He was an active participant in the freedom struggle. He was born in 1908 as the eldest child of a Muslim family in the village of Thalayolapparambu, in Kottayam district. Even as a boy he was attracted to Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals and principles and he was determined to join the freedom fight. He even wanted to go all the way to Gujrath and participate in Gandhiji's Dandhi march. This wish, however, was not realised. For, he was arrested and imprisoned on charges of anti-British political activities. On his release, he lost no time in starting a revolutionary journal significantly named, *Ujjivanam* (Uprising).

This brought him additional political troubles. A warrant was issued for his arrest and he left Kerala. On his return, after seven years, he was again arrested and condemned to rigorous imprisonment. The life stories that Basheer heard from prisoners and policemen were of considerable influence on him in his career as a writer. These stories, it may be said, provided him with more of insights into human miseries and behavioural patterns. They helped him write a number of stories which testify to his love and concern for people belonging to all sections of society. His humane and egalitarian outlook is evident in all of them. Thieves, pickpockets, prostitutes, and policemen appear in his works as characters. Basheer's life among mental patients has also been a crucial factor in widening his vision of humanity. He himself had suffered from mental illness two times in his life. It was while he was undergoing treatment at a mental asylum in Trichur that he wrote his renowned novel, *Pathumma's Goat*.

During the seven years Basheer was forced to live outside of Kerala consequent on the arrest warrant, he lived mostly like a vagabond. During this arduous period, he travelled around several parts of India, taking all types of menial jobs which seemed to keep him from starvation. His jobs included those of loom fitter, fortune teller, cook, paper seller, fruit seller, sports goods agent, accountant, watchman, cowman, and hotel manager. For some time, he also lived as a sanyasi, a Sufi, and a Buddhist monk. When his second imprisonment after his return was over, he remained in Kerala, where he

started making a living as a writer. He even ran a bookshop for some time. At the age of 40, he got married, settled down to a life of quiet domesticity in Beypore, a suburb of Calicut city and continued to write. Basheer's has been a life of rich and intensely felt experiences; this is particularly true of the period of his travels outside of Kerala. It was, for example, during this period of travails that he came to know the real meaning of hunger which can be seen as constituting a recurring theme in his works. The idea that no job is mean or contemptible, that every labour has its own dignity, informs a number of Basheer's works. This may be attributed to his own experiences with the variety of jobs during this period. Basheer has skilfully and unstintingly drawn on his personal experiences in the working out of his short stories and novels. For instance, in a narrative entitled *Amma (Mother)*, which was written in 1937 but published only in 1946 as part of *Ormakkurippu (Jottings from Memory)*, Basheer underscores his patriotism, recounting some of the incidents in his life as a political activist. The narrative also succinctly evokes the freedom movement through certain others active in it. His experiences as a political prisoner in the days of the British Raj delightfully resonate through some of his stories. The most celebrated among these stories is *Mathilukal (The Walls)*, which was published in 1965 and which is a moving tale of the love between two prisoners, one a Muslim and the other a Hindu. Significantly enough, their love is not shown as achieving its fulfilment in the world outside of the prison. It is a powerful novel which shows how

sometimes life's ironies impede life's joys and pleasures. More importantly, it embodies Basheer's progressive and liberal attitude to human intimacies and his vision that such intimacies like love between a man and a woman are often obstructed by socially constructed walls. The novel may also be seen as a sagacious exploration into the nature and impact of prison life. Accordingly, alienation, loneliness, want of freedom, loss of self-respect, and harsh treatment at the hands of the custodians of the prison are hilariously shown to be experiences organic to a life of incineration.

Basheer's use of language is quite unconventional. He did not differentiate between literary language and non-literary language. He used the Malayalam language as spoken by people at large. He didn't make a fuss about grammatical rules and proprieties. In deliberately using the language as he did, he was evidently subverting the canon and the obsession with literary language as a distinct language form most suitable for creative purposes. It may be useful to remember here that one of the most significant, and at the same time diverting, scenes in *Pathumma's Goat* is one which the adulation of grammar is uncompromisingly satirised. This violation of the literary decorum was sometimes frowned upon by the exponents of the literary language. But, Basheer stood his ground in his conception of language. He was outraged when publishers tried to edit and modify his language, so as to make it conform to the norms of standard Malayalam. He never allowed them to publish the edited version and insisted on the original.

The carnivalesque in *Pathumma's Goat* (1959) offers insights into the deep and intimate relationship between carnival, society, culture, and the ecosystem. This relationship is evidently underlined even in the novel's title, wherein Pathumma, a human and the goat, an animal are associated each with the other. The goat is not an alien or outsider; it belongs to the earth, as much as Pathumma does; it is part of the cosmic order, the ecosystem, as much as Pathumma is. Basheer's vision as embodied in the novel is, indubitably, profound. It comprehends the inevitable interdependence of man and the rest of creation.

The novel begins with the narrator's description of the premises of the house, where he has come to live again, taking a break from his truant, gypsy-like life. The premises are quite charming, as there are plants and trees such as jasmine, hibiscus, coconut, banana, mango and pineapple. This is, indeed, celebration of the fertility, abundance, and variety of nature and the earth, celebration of what is known as biodiversity. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has an ecological strand, too. This is reflected in his ideas on the grotesque and the material lower bodily stratum both of which are elements of the carnivalesque:

The grotesque body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars.... This body can merge with

various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe. (*Rabelais* 318)

The grotesque body is a dual body. The merging of the two bodies occurs when the cosmic body metaphorically mingles with the body of its inhabitants. In this sense, the narrator's survey and description of the surrounding forms of nature is this kind of a mingling and it fits in with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

The narrator's small crowded house has all the trappings of a carnival square with its motley crowds. It consists of elderly men and women, children, animals, and birds. It is this marketplace-like world of his own family that the narrator joins and participates in. He says: "I was right in the middle of trouble and noise" (*Pathumma* 24). Then, identifying some of the troublesome noises, he says with his characteristic sense of humour: "Children, cats, hens, women, kites, mice, crows, together they really create a din" (*Pathumma* 26).

In the context of the novel's action, the narrator's house, when viewed in the light of Bakhtin's conception of the chronotope, becomes paramountly important. Commenting on the novelistic function of chronotopes in his, *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin observes that they are "the organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place

where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (250). He further adds that it is to the chronotope that life and its events are fastened down or grafted. A chronotope can be a place or “a familiar territory” (225) with all its nooks and corners, with the entirety of its landscape of mountains valleys, fields, rivers and forests. Importantly enough, it can even be “one's own home” (225). “Idyllic life and its events”, says Bakhtin, “are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world” (225). The representation of the narrator’s house eminently suits this Bakhtinian idea of the chronotope. All the events and incidents that take place are tied to the house. The life of man, beast, and vegetation, which goes on inside and outside of it, has an idyllic aspect to it. In his essay, “Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight”, Michael McDowell comments on the usefulness of Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope:

Particularly useful to a dialogical analysis of landscape writing is Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope...which Bakhtin defines as ‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (376)’.

The narrator’s house and its immediate environment constitute a telling artistic expression of this connectedness between the temporal and the spatial. Indeed, The house has a carnivalesque, marketplace dimension to it. This is shown not only through the activities that go on inside it, but also through the presence and co-existence of men and women, children, and animals under its

very same roof. There are hundreds of mice, crows, chickens, hawks, and kites in and around. There are also cats who look like refugees. The narrator humorously terms them “refugee cats” (*Pathumma* 25). The imposing demeanour of the fowls is particularly amusing to the narrator and he jokingly comments that these inmates live “like rulers of the house” (*Pathumma* 25). The comparisons of the cats to refugees and of the fowls to rulers are not just instances of humour; they are fraught with sociological as well as ecological significance, giving us glimpses of Basheer’s generous, serious, and carnivalesque view of the world.

Basheer rejects anthropocentrism. He knows whose earth this actually is, even though man, placing himself at its centre, considers it to be predominantly his and legitimates, and arrogates to himself, the right to exploit everything on it to his advantage and advancement. The narrator’s house as imaged by Basheer is not just a simplistic human habitat. It is a symbolic microcosm of the macrocosm in which the rights of man and all other forms of life are equitable. It is this idea that is wittily and jovially put across through the image of the fowls deporting themselves like rulers of the house. Equally forceful in its suggestiveness is the expression ‘refugee cats’ with its parodic echo of refugee camps. The comparison between cats and refugees acquires a particular significance in the context of our age in which the refugee issue has been a serious international concern. Refugees, as everyone knows, are humans, desperate, homeless, dispossessed, and

deprived of their legitimate rights. In a sense, cats are like them and are treated as they are. Basheerian irony is here directed against the improprieties and illegitimacies of our view of, and attitudes to, both cats and refugees. At the same time, the comparison also dismantles the divide between humans and animals. It may be worthwhile to note here that this concern with the status of animals and refugees is what informs J.M Coetzee's well-known book *The Life of Animals*. The carnivalesque mode in which Basheer represents the narrator's house clearly interrogates man's obsession with his territoriality in relation to the earth. Our vaunted hierarchical systems are also subverted.

It is noteworthy that a considerable number of comic scenes in the novel focus on animals. As the title itself suggests, Pathumma's goat is central to the novel. It enjoys full freedom, and shows up everywhere in the household. It comes to the house in the morning, eats its breakfast from the kitchen, and wakes up the sleeping kids by stepping on them. In a sense, what distinguishes it as a carnivalesque figure is its insatiate appetite and incessant eating. Eating presupposes hunger and appetite. According to Bakhtin, eating is a process. Explaining it, he writes:

The confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense. This

element of victory and triumph is inherent in all banquet images. No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible.

(Rabelais 283)

This overstepping of confines is delightfully shown in the goat's habits of eating. It eats everything that comes on its way. It transgresses its limits, enters every nook and corner of the house. It makes itself a grotesque spectacle in terms of the varied, curious ways it resorts to while seeking and consuming its food. For instance, it gobbles up the fallen jack-leaves and jambu fruits. A funny scene is provided by the goat's struggles to stand on its hind legs and reach out for the bunches of fruits hanging, over its head, from the lower branches of the tree. Its body assumes an awkward posture which the watching narrator finds to be quite amusing. The goat's tongue, with which it picks up leaves, is repeatedly emphasised. Eating and swallowing are closely linked to the grotesque body. The scenes depicting the goat's greedy consumption project its gaping mouth, its protruding tongue, and its rounded lips as assuming positions different from the normal. Standing on the narrator's bed, the goat eats two of his books. When no more books are available, it begins to eat the narrator's blanket, too. At this point, the narrator, who has been silently watching the gleeful comedy, hurriedly intervenes and drives it away. The narrator is a shade mystified by the goat's behaviour and questions of a philosophic nature catapult in his mind: "How does it come to take such liberties? It goes everywhere! It does anything!"

(*Pathumma* 27). In yet another interesting scene, the goat attempts what the narrator felicitously terms “a bit of inter-caste dining” (*Pathumma* 44). When he is eating from a plate, the goat tries to intrude and eat out from the very same plate. His response is funny. Irritated, he shouts and calls out to his sister, Pathumma. She comes up and pulls the goat away. Pathumma’s reply to the narrator’s indignant instruction that she should keep her animal tethered is meaningful. She says: “Dear elder brother, it doesn’t like tied up” (*Pathumma* 44). What Basheer implies is that love of freedom is native to animals also and that restricting their freedom of movement amounts to denying them an inalienable right.

Hunger, freedom, and the bond between humans and animals are themes central to *Pathumma’s goat*. There is, in fact, an unmistakable foregrounding of hunger. In order to appease hunger, humans as well as animals will do anything even if it involves a violation of norms and seems weird. Even books will, at a pinch, be desirable food. The eating of the narrator’s books by the goat is a carnivalesque examination of this basic biological need and instinct. In the novel, there are a number of scenes through which Basheer subverts prevailing notions and reinforces the affinity between the human and animal bodies. Food, interestingly enough is also shown as an object of desire and eating as a pleasurable act. Eating, for Bakhtin, brings nothing to a conclusion. In it, “the positive ‘feast for all the

world' and the negative parasitical character are blended into the inwardly contradictory whole" (*Rabelais* 293).

The scene in which the goat tups at and eats the trousers of Abi, son of Haneefa, the narrator's brother is one of the high points of carnivalesque laughter in the novel. The goat almost finishes eating the front part of the trousers, as Abi continues to cling to it in an embrace, with both his arms fearlessly and affectionately thrown around its neck. There are the other children, too, with their gimmicks. Pathukkutty pulls the goat's tail, Zaid Mohammed takes hold of its horns, and Laila grasps its belly and chides it. The goat's tail, horn, and belly are all elements of the grotesque body. The children abusively call the goat "stupid twit" (*Pathumma* 45). It is, actually, Abi's mischief which has resulted in these revelries of the children. Abi stuffs some rice cakes in his pockets and, then standing in front of the goat he asks it to eat from his pockets. The scene fuses the goat and the kids into one fine, grotesque image of ecological significance. The comedy being enacted points up the native proclivity of animals and children to odd and grotesque ways of behaviour. It also indicates the possibility of an entirely fearless rapport between man and the beast. It is impossible to draw a line between the bodies at display. The human and animal binary is destroyed and the union of the two is carnivalesquely celebrated.

Children play a significant role in *Pathumma's Goat*. This accords well with the Bakhtinian view that children are incomplete beings fond of trickery,

noise, and disorderly behaviour. Their world is forever open to festivities. Such a children's world Basheer paints in the novel. His children constitute an important factor enhancing the novel's carnivalesque tenor. They eat, drink, shriek, shout and call out nicknames and interact with the animals and the world around them. The potential to transgress boundaries and create mirthful situations is native to them. Their actions are, as a rule, public events and they assert the fact of their presence and existence through them. In Basheer's hands they become endearing performers of a clownish order.

Basheer uses his carnivalesquely drawn children and their world as strategies, too, to raise issues of gender relations. The Ulladathipparu Scene is an instance of this. It revolves around the children of the house. A fight between Saidu Muhammed and Laila is at its centre. Laila calls him "ulladathiparu", "a stupid twit" (*Pathumma* 34). Saidu Muhammed takes offence at it and lodges a complaint about it with the narrator. To settle the issue, the amused narrator asks Saidu Muhammed to get a cane to threaten Laila. Treating the incident jokingly, the narrator says that it is unfair and undesirable "for a male person to be called a stupid twit! And that too, by a girl" (*Pathumma* 34). Diplomatically, he exhorts Laila not to call anyone a stupid twit again. It is important to note here that both the complainant and the culprit are portrayed as naked when they approach their arbitrator. Their nakedness is here used by Basheer to suggest their basic human identity and equality. The sense of inequality and male superiority, of which the boy is

conscious so early in life, is the result of culture and nurture, not of nature. The idea of gender equality is underlined in the narrator's mode of distributing sweets to the children. Making no distinction or discrimination between boy and girl, he gives each one of them an equal quantity of sweets. In the scene, gender equality is treated using such carnivalesque elements of childhood as abusive language, fights, and even love of confectionary.

In yet another grotesque scene, which relates to children, the narrator is put in charge of the kids Rasheed and Zubaida, when the women of the house go out to bathe in the river. The scene shows a highly funny commingling of children and animals. When the kids begin to cry, the narrator brings a lamb for them to play with. Then, the kids urinate. The lamb both urinates and defecates. It is to this site that Abu, the narrator's brother comes with his prodigious sensitivity to hygiene and cleanliness. Exasperated, he rolls his eyes and begins to shout. Terrified, the children stop crying. Terrified, the lamb, the cats, and the chicken take to flight. Commenting on Rabelais' theme of the overcoming of bodily confines, Bakhtin says:

The confines between bodies and the world are overcome. There is an interchange and inter-orientation. This is why the main events of the life of the grotesque body, acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. (*Rabelais* 317)

This Bakhtinian interchange and inter-orientation can be discerned in Basheer's association of biological acts like urinating and defecating, and also of emotional states like fear, with a lamb and the kids alike. Urinating and defecating are gestures connected with the lower bodily stratum. Basheer's use of urine and excretion adds to the scene's carnivalesque ambience.

Comic farce characterises the scene in which Pathumma's pet goat with its pranks and mischiefs becomes a remarkable spectacle. The goat puts its head into a pot in the kitchen and the head is caught in the pot. Cacophony pervades. Women quickly gather around to watch the scene. The narrators' old mother hectically tries to delink the pot and the head. Moved by curiosity, the narrator also appears on the scene. In a humorous vein, he describes the scene:

An uproar, I went to the kitchen and saw all the women standing there...bewildered. Umma was in charge of the proceedings. In the middle was Pathumma's goat. It had no head! That is to say that somehow being greedy, it had put its head into a pot.
(*Pathumma* 74)

When the old mother's attempts fail, other women join in and together they pull and tug to separate the head from the pot. The terrified goat with its head fully inside the pot becomes a headless, faceless goat, a goat with a pot for a head. It becomes a grotesque spectacle. The image of the goat in this guise

and of the women folk busy trying to pull the head out, so that there is no loss of an item of the kitchenware is highly comical. The climax comes when the narrator picks a stone and throws it at the pot. The pot breaks into pieces, dismaying the women. The narrator is happy, but his mother is angry because she has lost a good pot. So, she mocks her son: “We too could have done that! A clever piece of work! Breaking a perfectly good pot!” (*Pathumma* 74). The scene closes with Pathumma’s apologies for her goat’s misbehaviour. The fun, however, does not end here. It is soon restored with another of its mischiefs. It breaks a large kanji pot. Loud noises, complaints and laughter ensue, creating a miniature domestic pandemonium. The narrator says: “I could hear the noises of Anummas and Aishomma, umma’s scolding, the children’s laughter, Pathumma’s apologies”. (*Pathumma* 75)

The Bath scene is also of interest. Its comedy derives from the naked body. It is significant that the stark naked body of the children is repeatedly emphasised in the novel. Nakedness is associated with innocence and artlessness. One day, the narrator takes the children to have a bath in the river. While they are all bathing, Abi sees one of his schoolmates. Suddenly he becomes conscious of his nudity. Abi’s sudden sense of shame embarrasses the narrator because Abi had come to the river without any clothes on. The narrator gives Abi a towel to cover his naked body. Immediately, Pathukkutti also demands a towel and he gives one to her, too. The narrator comments: “Laila and Saidu Muhammed had not taken it into their heads to feel shy. If

they had, what could I have done? I had only two towels with me” (*Pathumma* 47). His words reflect his own fear of nakedness. The emphasis in the scene is on nakedness as an element of the lower bodily stratum and as a natural dimension of corporeality. Nurture, not nature, teaches sartorial culture. What is subverted is man’s defective vision, and exaggerated fear, of nakedness.

The idea of cleanliness is also accorded a carnivalesque treatment. Over the centuries, the body has been constructed as an impure entity. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque with its emphasis on the grotesque body, its orifices and fluids does not view it negatively. On the other hand, it mocks man’s cultural notions about hygiene or cleanliness. This theme is treated through the figure of Abubaker, the narrator’s youngest brother who has a ridiculous sense of hygiene. He wears only well-washed and ironed clothes, he combs and dresses his hair with meticulous care and he has “sixty pairs of sandals” (*Pathumma* 30). The narrator sarcastically puts it, “he has a mania for cleanliness” (*Pathumma* 30). As such, Abu abhors the ways of the cats, goats, and crows. To him, animals are the impure ‘other’. He panics when he sees them urinate or defecate in the front yard or on the doorstep. He then beats, kicks, and chases them away. To them, he is a terror: “As soon as they heard Abu, the cats ran away, the crow flew off, the hens scattered, Pathumma’s goat ran over to where the women were, and the children stopped crying. The kites and hawks quietly hid somewhere. Even the women

stopped talking. The house became silent.” (*Pathumma* 31) He is unhappy with the freedom with which they roam the household. He angrily asks his people at home: “How can you permit all this? Cats, children, hens, crows, goats! Letting it become a place to feed and bring up a goat!” (*Pathumma* 31). The binaries of purity and impurity are cultural constructs which sometimes operate unwholesomely in human affairs and relations. For example, it is Abu’s overblown sense of hygiene that alienates him from the animals. In reality, what is supposed to be to be impure manifests itself in both in human and animal bodies. Blood, menstrual blood, urine, spit, and excreta, which have traditionally been viewed as being dangerously impure, are natural bodily elements.

In the novel, Abu also represents officialdom. His speech reflects patriarchal and anthropocentric values which silence women and children and make despicable and inferior creatures of animals. He always speaks with authority and power. He gets offended when his elder sister Pathumma calls him by his name. She is, senior to him in age. Since he is a male, he considers himself to be superior to her. So, when he suspects that she has not been respectful enough toward him, he makes an issue of it. He is a male chauvinist. He is degraded in the novel: “He is so skinny! And what a loud mouth”(*Pathumma* 31). With his thin body, his overloud speech, his grievances, and with his overrated modernism which expresses itself in his

exaggerated sense of hygiene, his passion for shoes, and his unwavering attention to personal appearance Abu becomes more or less, a buffoon.

Subversion of official language is done through Abdulkhader's obsession with standard language. As a school teacher, he would never jettison grammaticality. Even at a young age, he was careful to speak correct language. When he was a school boy, one day, while taking dinner, he asked his mother to get him some water in the most official way: "Mater, Kindly give me some pure water" (*Pathumma* 48). His mother became furious and beat him with a spoon with which she was serving food. When she heard her husband appreciating his mastery of standard language, she beat him again and called him "the cripple" (*Pathumma* 48). He is lame-footed. The popular festive image of beating and the abusive term denoting his grotesque body function here as a carnivalesque strategy to debase the proponents of official language, who marginalise unofficial, folk forms of language. Another incident occurs when the narrator is living peacefully like "a writer". One day, Abdul Khader calls on him, "supporting himself on his iron stick" (*Pathumma* 89) and holding in his hand "a big fat fountain pen" (*Pathumma* 89) He asks the narrator to pass some of his articles to him so that he can go through them. The narrator proudly hands over his "literary creations" to him. But, Abdul Khader's response turns out to be contrary to his expectations. He sarcastically explains it:

“On all the things he had read he had underlined things with his fat pen. He gave me a contemptuous look. Then he read out a sentence...he asked me, ‘Where is the predicate in this?’ ... He lectured me on the topic of grammar, telling me about subject, predicate, concord and a whole lot of stuff like that, with all sorts of clever words. In the course of the half-hour’s conversation he made me out to be an ignoramus. Then he said, ‘You should take lessons in grammar. (*Pathumma* 90)

Abdul Khader also recommends a few books on grammar. Infuriated by his lengthy speech on grammar the narrator gives him a piece of his mind. He shrieks at him: “Clear off, get up and get out! You and your grammar! You big thief... What of it, if it doesn’t have one of your silly predicates? Cripple!” (*Pathumma* 91). The scene humorously treats the divide between standard language and non-standard language. The carnivalesque, it is useful to remember here, critiques the bifurcation of language into official and unofficial. Patterns of language that transgress the limits of officially endorsed language are usually degraded as “unofficial (unprintable) argot” (*Rabelais* 188). But, the carnivalesque approves of such speech forms. In Bakhtin’s view, colloquialisms, abuses, profanities, curses, oaths, and improprieties are elements of the unofficial speech: “They refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, and respectability....Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom,

become themselves a peculiar argot” (*Rabelais* 188). The carnivalesque, as has already been mentioned, celebrates what Rabelais calls “*grammatical jocose*” or laughing Grammar. The expulsion of Abdul Khader is the debasement of the official concepts of standard and literary language. It is also the crowning of popular folk forms of language. It may be noted here that Basheer is well-known for his use of folk idiom as an important factor of his carnivalesque narrative mode.

The grotesque body is also explored through Abdul Khader. He is lame-footed: “His right leg is very thin.... He supports himself with a steel stick when he walks” (*Pathumma* 38). Recollecting their childhood days the narrator says, “Both in school and out Abdulkhader was a proper rascal” (*Pathumma* 48). He very often got beaten by his school teacher. His lameness and gestures are a source of laughter. Most funny is the acrobatic style in which he proudly brings his supple and flexible right lame foot up to his nose, exulting over the fact that others with their normal body cannot do so. He compels them to try it. When they fail he also compels them to smell the sole of his “crippled foot” (*Pathumma* 49). If they are unwilling to do it, they have to receive his beatings, kicks and punches and “if the other children moved to a safe distance, he would beat his chest and cry” (*Pathumma* 49). He is a cunning trickster who takes advantage of his grotesque body. The narrator says that “because of his lameness, people generally felt sorry for him. He exploited that to the utmost” (*Pathumma* 49). He manipulates his mother and

sisters to get money from them. From time to time, his own lameness appears to debase his arrogant attitudes and actions, particularly his selfishness and cunningness. It is his own negative view of his body that makes him behave in odd ways. He is degraded by the repeated use of the term “cripple” (*Pathumma* 38) to refer to him. At the same time, his acrobatics with his lame leg and the way he makes his unsuccessful competitors smell his feet are his attempts at surmounting his degraded status. His role in the novel is akin to that of a carnival joker or prankster. He also becomes a carnival king in another scene. He beats the narrator and makes him carry his books, too, while going to school together. The narrator describes the grotesque way he does it standing on one leg:

...standing on one leg, he would draw back, swing round and strike me full in the chest. Slightly stunned, I would fall down and lie there...and think sadly: What justice is there in this, for a younger brother to deal out punches and for an elder brother to take them- and then to carry books and slate? I would lie there, and he would sit on my chest and ask, ‘Do you want some more?’ (*Pathumma* 50)

One day, the narrator protests and beats him back. He angrily says: “I kept on getting beaten, I kept on carrying his books. The storm of protest raged within me” (*Pathumma* 49). At this juncture, an inversion of roles occurs. The

narrator strikes Abdul Khader back on his good leg, which makes him fall flat on his back. Promptly, the narrator settles on his chest, doing exactly what he used to do to him. This is Abdul Khader's carnivalesque uncrowning. Frightened, Abdul Khader cries out: "I shall carry your slate and books" (*Pathumma* 51). But, the narrator asks him to carry only his books. The festive images of punching, beating, striking, crowning and uncrowning are used to show the operation of power and its tactics. Abdul Khader creates fear in his elder brother, the narrator, subjugates him and makes him bear the burden of his books. Subsequently, when the narrator sheds his fear and protests, his subservience ceases and his rights are restored to him. The processes of power, dominance, and colonisation, and the role of fear in them are here explored in the scene. Basheer's carnivalesque scenes embody serious political and socio-cultural meditations. This is true of the simple and humorous scene depicting the tug-of-war between the two brothers. The scene carnivalesquely debases fear and glorifies fearlessness as the most important pre-requisite for emancipation from all forms of wretchedness and subjugation and for regaining the forcefully denied rights and liberties.

The popular festive image of beating recurs in the novel. Humorous scenes which express the fear of being beaten are also repeated. For example, the school teacher beats Abdul Khader; the narrator and Abdul Khader beat each other. There are also parents beating their children. The children of the house are scared of corporeal punishment at the hands of their parents.

Intimidation as a logic of power and as a coercive official strategy is parodically mocked. Such scenes show the relation between officialdom and the body which becomes the focal point of disciplinary power.

The narrator's old mother is also a carnivalesquely delineated character. She is seventy years of age. Still, she has her teeth and her tremendous energy. She is always ready to do all the household work. Scolding the women of the house, making "a fair amount of noise" (*Pathumma* 36), feeding the goats, cats and other animals, she roams around the house and runs and controls it. Her sneaky ways of extracting money from the narrator are a real source of laughter. There is an incongruity between her age and her behaviour. This is what makes her look a grotesque figure when she appears carrying a large pot full of water in each of her arms. She does not conform to the norms of aging. The narrator asks her to hand over her familial duties to the young women of the house. To this, she replies, laughing: "None of them knows a thing. They haven't learnt how to look after the house" (*Pathumma* 36).

Female characters also contribute to the creation of the novel's carnivalesque atmosphere. Carnival is a collective event and, undoubtedly, women are a significant part of it, just as men, animals, and children are. Basheer has constructed his female characters as tricksters. Their trickeries permeate the novel. Women's conduct is always a serious concern of

officialdom. Women's inappropriate speech and gestures are seldom tolerated by patriarchy and society. The women in the novel are noisy, clever, intelligent, and able. They complain, tease each other with little concern for propriety or decorum, and even disclose each others' secrets. Everything that they do secretly becomes comically public. They even perform planned trickeries. Their use of language, while playing tricks on others, is comic, though effective. The funny ways in which they persuade the narrator to give them money and their stealing of milk are some of their trickeries which make carnivalesque figures of them.

The pregnant body and childbirth, which are elements of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque can also be seen to function in the novel in a delightful fashion. The analogy between Anumma's pregnant and the goat's pregnant body is an instance of this. When Pathumma's goat gives birth to a baby, it becomes a festive family event, because everyone has been looking forward to its milk. The narrator's description captures the festive mood:

...the happy event was due to take place at noon...I became anxious...I recalled many cases of death in childbirth...What I did see was a crowd of people....In addition to them, the women of the neighbourhood. It was like some big celebration. Everybody was happy. (*Pathumma* 76)

Everyone rejoices. The children go about the house spreading the news. Abi proudly claims that he was the first to see the “the whole birth from start to finish” (*Pathumma* 77). The narrator, too, is excited to see the goat and the kid: “On the veranda were the mother and kid. The kid was beautiful and white. It lay there coolly looking at this great universe” (*Pathumma* 77). He gives the goat a banana to eat. The narrator’s reactions are of interest in this context. For instance, he asks the women to give the goat and its kid a mat to lie on and he gets angry when he learns that the women have put the kid inside a basket in the kitchen. He shouts at them: “Marvellous...Won’t it feel suffocated? Would you put any of your own children under a basket like this?” (*Pathumma* 78).

What is subverted here is the unjustness of man’s treatment of animals. The value of a goat’s kid is much less than that of a human kid. The scene is ecologically significant, too. The image of the goat’s kid ‘coolly looking at the great universe’ links it with the cosmic scheme. It is part of the universe. A little later, watching the mother goat and the kid standing under the jambu tree, he reflects: “The mother might have brought its offspring to show it where their food came from. The kid, unsteady on its feet, fell down.... I felt like picking it up and kissing it.” (*Pathumma* 79). The images of the goat, its kid, the jambu tree, and the narrator bring together human, animal, and the vegetable worlds suggesting that they are parts of one great ecosystem and are interdependent. There is also a contrast between the mother goat’s concern for

its kid and the nonchalance with which the women put the kid in a basket in the kitchen. The women are more interested in the mother goat's milk than in its kid. In spite of their being women who experience maternity, they have failed to understand how it intimately links them with the mother goat. In a sense, the motherhood of the goat is crowned and that of the women uncrowned.

Stealing abounds in the novel. Elements of laughter, popular festive imagery, and the grotesque can be discerned in the many stealing episodes in the novel. As a young child, Abdul Khader, steals money from his mother. He would go and suck his mother's breast and steal money from her betel-nut bag. He consistently steals ghee and sugar. The narrator also steals his mother's money and buys tea and snacks for him and his brothers. Abu steals the narrator's shirt. The mother and Abdul Khader steal the narrator's dhotis. The women steal the goat's milk without Pathumma's knowledge. The goat steals black tea and other items of food from the kitchen and the children steal fruits and sweets from the narrator's room. But, stealing is not described as an offensive and serious act. It is seen as a cheerful and mischievous act. Every act of theft in the novel is discovered and made public producing collective laughter. In literary works, it is through the popular festive images that the character's "private lives and their secrets are disclosed" (*Rabelais* 257).

The episode of stealing 'Ghee and sugar' in the novel is highly humorous. It turns out to be a culinary comedy. When they were kids, the

narrator and his brother Abdul Khader used to steal ghee and sugar. The comedy, however, was that Abdul Khader was never caught. Instead, the narrator received all the blames and beatings from his father and mother. His mother used to beat him with a wooden spoon and chase him out whenever he went to the kitchen to have some snack. The episode underlines the popular festive images of food, trickeries, stealing, beatings, and chasing. One day, the narrator's eyes fell on the jars of sugar and ghee kept inside his father's bedroom. Seizing the opportunity he secretly went and started eating ghee and sugar mixing them together in a bowl. It was delicious. As he was munching on, he heard a whisper. When he turned around he saw Abdulkhader standing next to him watching it all. He gave him some and he licked the bowl clean. A few days later Abdul Khader fell ill. The narrator says: "It was Abdul Khader's illness that was interesting. He has become as fat as a drum. He was always drinking water. He had no appetite" (*Pathumma* 68). Everyone in the house grew anxious about it and they brought an astrologer as he was the best physician available: "The astrologer came. After that came Velan, another doctor. After that the Muslim elder came"(*Pathumma* 68). They all examined his body but could not find out the cause of the disease. As such, it became an incurable and "mysterious disease" (*Pathumma* 69). But the narrator knew well that Abdul Khader had stolen and eaten all the ghee and sugar and it was this over eating that had made him sick. He told everyone that Abdul Khader was the ghee and sugar thief. No one believed him. When things were going

on that way, the narrator one day heard a noise from his father's bedroom: "The noise of something crunching" (*Pathumma* 69) and when he peeped in he saw two legs under his father's cot and "one of them was a withered leg" (*Pathumma* 69). It was Abdul khader and he was stealing and eating ghee and sugar as usual. The narrator rushed to his mother and told her angrily and triumphantly: "If you want to see Abdul Khader's sickness, come quickly" (*Pathumma* 69). She came and others also joined her. They saw the thief under the cot. Caught red-handed, he was beaten rather severely. father and mother. The narrator stood there laughing and "watching the pleasing sight" (*Pathumma* 69). The scene is full of popular festive images. Abdul Khader becomes a grotesque figure with his lame foot and his disease. His disease is the Bakhtinian "gay disease" which is related to excessive eating. The elements of the grotesque body like the stomach and munching jaws are also at the centre of the scene.

Another humorously portrayed stealing scene is the theft of milk by the women of the house. Hearing an uproar and laughter, the narrator seeks out its source. He discovers that it is from the kitchen and the women and children are all in a festive mood: "They were all drinking tea with milk along with their tapioca puttu! They were all laughing" (*Pathumma* 92). When he asks his mother about the reason for this mirth and joy, she tells him that they have milked Pathumma's goat without her knowledge, using the kids Zubaida and Rasheed to suck the goat's breasts like lambs. The image of the kids lying

under the goat and sucking its breasts standing all around is a grotesque mixing of human and animal bodies. It is an act of collective theft. Stealing, laughing, eating, drinking, and frank and fearless communication characterise the scene, making it greatly carnivalesque.

Basheer's preoccupation with the grotesque body can also be seen in his depiction of postman Kuttan Pillai. There is a swelling on his cheek "as big as a mango" (*Pathumma* 83). People can easily identify this feature of his face and his grotesque body is instantly turned into a spectacle. When Kuttan Pillai brings the money order, the narrator intently looks at his swollen cheeks. Later, they engage in a free and cordial interaction. The narrator learns from Kuttai Pillai that the members of his family have already conspired to get the details of the money order. Angry over their stealthy ways, the narrator gives the one hundred rupee money order to Pathumma's goat. The goat greedily and happily eats it. The sight makes Kuttan Pillai laughs merrily and walks away. Kuttan Pillai is imaged as being physically grotesque, but good at heart.

Marketplace images of buying and selling can also be seen in the novel. The narrator's old mother sells jambu fruits to school girls for small sums of money. The narrator picks a quarrel with her over the rights of ownership. He claims that he had planted the jambu tree a few years ago and that he was, therefore, its rightful owner. He tells her with authority: "I am

the one who planted it” (*Pathumma* 56) and asked her to hand over the money to him. He takes over the business. When girls come to buy the fruits, he takes care to give them the smallest ones. The scene exposes the tactics of exploitation involved in market culture. The children of the house also sell fruits in the market. The narrator, who is surprised to see them sell jambu fruits, describes the scene:

Abi and Pathukkutti were sitting in the middle of the crowd with a small basket full of Jambu fruits; like a couple of mice surrounded by thousands upon thousands upon elephants. The two of them were conducting a sale. Abi was the salesman.
(*Pathumma* 74)

What is so striking about their sale is the way they advertise their commodity. Like a typical street vendor Abi calls out: “One of my hands for quarter Anna. Both my hands plus one for two quarter annas!” (*Pathumma* 74). They, too, earn some money through their sale. The children become an amusing spectacle in the marketplace. Haneefa’s tricks to sell his land to the narrator exemplify typical marketplace strategies. He tells his brother, the narrator: “I am considering selling my place... I’ll let you have it for a low price....As it’s you. I’ll let it go cheap. Give me ten thousand rupees.” (*Pathumma* 42). The “images of commercial advertising from those of the barker, apothecary, actor, quack, and astrologer making their announcements at the fairs” (*Rabelais* 183) are part of marketplace culture.

Pathumma's Goat becomes profoundly carnivalesque in its extraordinary use of colloquial language. It unravels a world where people's interactions are based on the principles of frankness and freedom. It turns out to be a site where norms of behaviour, etiquette, and language are transgressed. The language spoken by the characters in the novel is a kind of unofficial folk language. This type of communication is specific to the language of the marketplace. Basheer uses the regional variety of Malayalam, subverting the canon, the notion of standard language. Laughing at the official language and mocking its concern with grammatical correctness, Basheer even coins certain meaningless and comic terms. His neologisms are idiosyncratic. Nicknames and colloquially used terms and expressions of abuse are also interesting features of the novel. The characters' conversational tone and multiple voices, which are heard throughout the novel makes it both polyphonic and dialogic, too.

Chapter VI

The Ludic Game

Angela Olive Stalker Carter (1940-1992), internationally known by the abbreviated name of Angela Carter, is a British writer. Her literary oeuvre comprises novels, short stories, critical studies and journalistic writing. She is a writer who stands defiantly apart from her contemporaries. She has tried her hands at various genres like gothic horror, surrealism, science fiction, folklore, fairytale, fantasy, eroticism, and even pornography. Her works particularly her novels and short stories are funny and horrifying and are marked by a keen, subversive intelligence and the potential of magical realism. She has created her own revisionist and feminist versions of fairy tales and fiction. Her exploitation of a variety of literary devices and genres outside the literary mainstream has imparted to her works an enduring quality. This has made them remarkably endearing to both literary scholars and to the reading public at large and placed her squarely in the midst of the most noted of Britain's postmodern writers. Surreal characters and settings pervade her fictional world and through them she unhesitatingly upends received notions of reality. Female identity, body, and sexuality and a number of allied themes are the central concerns in her fiction as well as non-fiction.

A native of Eastbourne, Sussex, Angela Carter was born in 1940. Her father was a renowned journalist. She studied psychology and sociology at

Bristol University and started out her career as a journalist, writing music reviews. In 1960, she married Paul Carter, who was a lover of folk music and a producer of folk records. It was under his influence that Carter became interested in English Folk Revival and in the campaign for nuclear disarmament. The marriage, however, disintegrated and they divorced in 1972. Subsequently, for four consecutive years, she worked as a journalist.

Carter is the author of nine well-known novels, all of them remarkably packed with an extraordinary range of themes, ideas, and images. She has, however, not confined herself to writing novels alone. A prolific writer, Carter's creativity has found expression in terms of a considerable number of short stories and works of non-fiction. Her short story collections are *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), *Black Venus's Tale* (1980), *Black Venus* (1985) and posthumously published *American Ghosts & Old-World Wonders* (1993). Of these, later, *Black Venus* was reprinted in America in the year 1987, with the altered title, *Saints and Strangers*. She is also the author of four fascinating collections of children's stories. She has also to her credit a work in verse entitled *Unicorn* (1966) and four radio plays. She has edited and translated *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977) and *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales* (1982) and also edited two collections for Virago: *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992). Of her non-fiction works, the most significant are *The Sadeian*

Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History (1979) which was reprinted in America as *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* in 1979, *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (1982), and *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (1992). Carter's journalistic writings are pungent and powerful; lyricism and a mocking, sarcastic tone are characteristic of it. Her most celebrated contribution in this sphere is a collection of essays titled *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* which was published posthumously in 1997. The collection brilliantly demonstrates Carter's capacity for acute observation of the world around her and for expressing her meditations on it in a diverting fashion. The essays explore such significant socio-cultural issues and concerns as film, food, feminism, fantasy, and sex and sexuality.

Carter published her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, in 1966. It tells a Gothic murder story set in a city which is distinctly like the city of Bristol. Even in this work, first published in the United States, can be seen her outspokenness as a creative writer. The unhesitating examination of sexual stereotypes in the novel is a clear index of this. Her early novels were criticised for depicting characters overtaken by extravagant despair. Nevertheless, by virtue of the very same novels, Carter could garner considerable praise for her powerful imagination. Her second novel, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), has been celebrated as a feminist narrative. It is a bildungsroman and a coming-of-age story. It is in this novel Carter first employs the elements of fairytale. The novel also makes her predilection for

intertextuality evident through its allusions to modernist texts like D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Her third novel *Several Perceptions* appeared in 1968 and her fourth, *Heroes and Villains* in 1969. Set in post-cataclysmic England, *Heroes and Villains* tells the story of a girl who gains in power through her sexual knowledge. These early works reveal Carter's keen interest in fairytales and her awareness of their susceptibility to modern reinterpretations. These works also bear witness to the rapid development of Carter's concern with the many facets of female sexuality, a theme that is central to most of her works throughout her career. Working class poverty and powerlessness is also one of the major themes in them. These early works, it may be said, clearly presage what were to become the central thematic preoccupations in Carter's later works.

After receiving the Somerset Maugham award for *Several Perceptions*, Carter visited Japan and stayed for two years in Tokyo. Later, she travelled to the USA and lived there some years. Her travels and experiences overseas were crucial to her life and thinking. It was during these years that her works turned more speculative and intellectually demanding. On her return to England, Carter had to face certain initial difficulties. She could not find a publisher with whom she could establish a secure relationship. Her works were not well-received by the mainstream critics who took exception to her departure from the realistic mode. Her Japanese and American experiences had brought about shifts in her perception of culture and deepened her

awareness of its variety and diversity across national borders. This is particularly evident in two of her novels, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). The former is Carter's most philosophically complex novel and it shows her rather deep acquaintance with Freudian psychology.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Carter became increasingly interested in Women's Rights and Liberation movements. In 1979, she published her most talked about non-fiction work, *The Sadeian Woman*. In this work, Carter subjects the French writer and thinker Marquis de Sade's works and his pornographic treatment of female body and sexuality to a rather painstaking scrutiny. She examines the sadomasochistic male-female relationships as imaged in the works of Sade. The publication of *The Sadeian Woman* made Angela Carter a problematic figure in the debates on pornography. In the work she defends Sade, contending that he treats all sexual reality as a political reality and that he stands for women's rights to have sex as cruelly, tyrannically, and aggressively as men used to have it. This book was an enormously significant contribution to the feminist debates on pornography that had began during the mid-1970s and have continued to the present. In her essay, 'Notes from the Frontline' (1983), Carter declares herself as a feminist and, also, identifies the major influences on shaping her career. As a journalist and a writer, she was quite aware of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement of the 60s in the United States and of the

1968 Student Protest in France. Women's Rights Movement was impinging on centuries old sexism and gradually changing popular notions of sexuality and gender relationships. Carter's works are indisputably subversive and free in its treatment of human sexuality. This can legitimately be attributed to the impact of the innovative, subversive, and unconventional shifts sweeping across the culture and society of her age. Carter was an inevitable product of her times.

Carter's perception of the post-war, post-industrialist, and post-imperialist Britain, a country in decline, finds expression in her later fiction, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991). It is interesting to note here that, Britain's waning power is linked, in *Wise Children*, with the decline in the prestige and influence of the English theatre. Carter does not mourn the loss of Britain's Imperial power. Instead, she seems to be celebrating the collapse of Britain's grand narratives. Proletarian motifs also figure in these works. The working class people are here imaged in a positive light. Their wit, resilience, and creative energy are underscored through an ebullient featuring of a riotously upside down world.

The allusiveness of Carter's writing is strikingly vast. Her novels abound in explicit and implicit, references to mythology, the Bible, European and English literary texts, fairy tales, European art, film, opera, ballet, and various music forms. Linguistic theory, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and

European critical theories like Post-structuralism and French feminism have been major influences on Carter. This massive intertextuality of Carter's works very often becomes a formidable barrier to defining and categorising Carter as writer who belongs to one, single literary tradition. European art, particularly that of the French Symbolists and Dadaists, has also been an obvious influence on her writings. A host of great writers like Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, William Blake, Mary Shelley, Marquis de Sade, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Dostoevsky, Lewis Carroll, and Bram Stoker have also been sources of inspiration for her. In terms of the diversity of her ideas and thoughts and in terms of the novelty of her narrative strategies, Carter is one of the most remarkable of twentieth century novelists.

Carter employs the carnivalesque as a literary mode to contest the canon and to redefine the mythic patterns and structures that usually shape our thinking. *Nights at the Circus* (1984), which can be read from a carnivalesque point of view, re-evaluates the monologic concepts of subjectivity, femininity and female body. It also unmask the politics of female representation in literature. Parody, mockery, and intertextuality are also crucial to it. The novel also expresses Carter's egalitarianism concern for the excluded and the oppressed.

Nights at the circus is divided into three geographical locations and is set in 1899, the closing year of Victorian era:

...we are at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history. It is the final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety nine....a new era about to take off (*Nights 6*).

The novel opens in the dressing room of its female protagonist Sophie Fevvers, in Alhambra Hall in London. Here, she is interviewed by Walser, an American journalist. A famous circus aerialist and trapeze artist, Fevvers has signed a contract for an American circus troupe called “Grand Imperial Tour” (*Nights 6*) which plans to tour Russia and Japan. She is famed as a bird-woman because of her art of flying with her large wings. Walser, however, is skeptical of her “much -debated wings” (*Nights 1*) and so has set out to discover the truth about her. Indeed, he hopes to hold, with her, a series of interviews to be published as “Great Humbugs of the World” (*Nights 6*). Their interaction gradually unfolds Fevvers’ physical as well as behavioural oddities. Central to Fevvers personality is the Bakhtinian grotesque body, the body with its weird buds and sprouts. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin writes:

The artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into body’s depths (318).

An orphan, Fevvers is, in fact, a hunchback. She is six foot tall and gargantuan in size. The hump or lump is a sprout which outgrows the limits of the body. The image of Fevvers as a hunchback subverts all limiting concepts of the female body. In spite of her deformity, she can triple somersault and perform her art with great speed. Spectators say that “she travels through the air at a cool sixty miles an hour” (*Nights* 11). She is called Cockney Venus, Helen of High Wire, The English Angel and “The Angel of Death” (*Nights* 11) in admiration of her capacity to transform her humps into wings like those of “an eagle, condor and an albatross fed to excess” (*Nights* 9). Her art is her strategy to survive and to confuse her audience, particularly the regulatory male gaze.

By portraying Fevvers as a spectacle, Carter underlines the positive aspects of the grotesque female body. To Bakhtin, grotesque body is dual and ambivalent. Fevvers is a dual-bodied bird-woman. Her physicality and identity are ambivalent. To people, she is either fact or fiction, bird or woman, virgin or whore. This image, which she herself has constructed, gives her ample freedom to deviate from norms and behave in ways contrary to those expected of her as a woman. Through Fevvers, Carter hilariously interrogates the male concepts of femininity and female subjectivity.

Fevvers is wise. She has an excellent sense of humour and she speaks the cockney variety of English. She is aware of the ideologies that construct

female identity and subjectivity, and delimit a woman's choices and freedoms. She resists such discursive practices. In a carnivalesque and laughter provoking way she narrates her story to Walser. Playing upon his sensibilities, she fantasizes her story. She tells Walser that she has been hatched from an egg, like Helen of Troy: "I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels* ...but just like Helen of Troy, was hatched" (*Nights* 1). Then, she laughs uproariously beating on her marble-like thighs. Carter's interest in (her) storicism is evident in her emphasis on the strategies Fevvers adopts to tell her own story.

Fevvers' metamorphosis into a bird woman and the fame she acquires through it, constitute the crowning of the grotesque. She is quite a sensation in London and there is a Fevvermania everywhere:

Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with Fevver's "garters, stockings, fans, cigars, shaving soap...she even lent it to a brand of baking powder; if you added a spoonful of the stuff, up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did. Heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise, this Helen launched a thousand quips; mostly on the lewd side....Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger. (*Nights* 4)

The reference to Helen of Troy and the parody of Marlow's celebrated tribute to her beauty in his play *Doctor Faustus* are of significance. Carter subverts the myth of female beauty by making Fevvers the Helen of London who has 'launched a thousand quips.' Transfiguring Fevvers into a mock-goddess and giving her a mock-mythic status, the ideal or the perfect is profaned.

Use of praise-abuse is an aspect of Carter's descriptive strategy. For Bakhtin, "praise and abuse is completely alien to official genres, it is characteristic of folk culture" (*Nights* 166). On stage, when she flies, Fevvers looks like a goddess, graceful and divinely tall; off-stage, she looks "more like a dray mare than an angel" (*Nights* 7). It is her off-stage appearance that makes her earthly qualities apparent. Then, her gestures turn grotesque and she becomes a material being. Carter describes her: "It was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it" (*Nights* 7). Bakhtin's observations on the praise-abuse technique are of relevance here:

This praise and abuse...is a two-faced Janus....Though divided in form it belongs to the same body, or to the two bodies in one, which abuses while praising and praises while abusing....This grotesque language... is oriented toward the world and toward all the world's phenomena in their condition of unfinished metamorphosis (*Rabelais* 165).

Fevvers is hard-working and dreams of money and bank accounts all night. To her, “the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers” (*Nights* 7). In reality, she is greatly lacking in femininity. She is a giant with bodily odours and has a strong masculine grip. Her voice clangs like ‘dustbin lids’ (*Nights* 7). Her face was broad and oval-shaped like a “meat dish” (*Nights* 7). Her gestures had no grandeur. While talking to Walser, she drinks large quantities of champagne to quench her gargantuan thirst. She even farts indecorously, shifting from one buttock to the other. She eats enormously, too:

... her mouth was too full for a riposte as she tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies’ fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety... until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. She gave him another look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of gluttony would drive him away. (*Nights* 12)

She is intensely conscious of her grotesque body.

This celebration of the grotesque through the figure of Fevvers can also be viewed as Carter’s postmodern feminist strategy to critique dichotomies

such as perfect/imperfect, real/unreal, fact/fiction, sacred/ profane, divine/mundane, rational/irrational, object/subject, and the masculine/feminine. From a postmodern perspective Fevvers story rejects absolute truth and metanarratives. From a feminist perspective it foregrounds (her)story. Carter seems to suggest that rationality is not a necessary condition of truth. Fevvers' story emphasizes plurality and fluidity. Rather than attempting to privilege feminine truth over masculine truth, carter offers, through her carnivalesque strategies, a means of displacing the gendered division of knowledge. In her book, *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse; Post-war II Fiction* (1996) Magali Cornier Michael writes:

One of the central preoccupations with *Nights at the Circus* is its challenge to the traditional western opposition between reality and fiction. However, Carter's novel uses different strategies than the other novels to disrupt that dichotomy: the construction of carnival spheres, the relativising of time, and the creation of fantastic images. The novel's rejection of any neat demarcation between reality and fiction functions as the pivotal strategy for undermining the western conception of the subject and the traditional gender categories and for offering forms of liberating power. This liberating power carries with it possibilities for the change in the realms of subjecthood and the

relation between the sexes and also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction. (173)

Walser, the American journalist represents officialdom. His manners and professionalism are also described in a praise-abusive style: “The dual image combining praise and abuse seeks to grasp the very moment of change, the transfer from old to the new.... Such an image crowns and uncrowns at the same moment” (*Rabelais* 166). Walser is a sharp contrast to Fevvers. He needs a couple of inches to match her height. He is a widely travelled journalist who hails from California. He is a man of action and has a picaresque career. He has smooth manners and an American generosity. He can speak with great talent. He takes pride in his professional success. Above all, he is a scrupulous journalist with “a thatch of unruly flaxen hair, a ruddy, pleasant, square-jawed face and eyes the cool grey of scepticism” (*Nights* 5). The juxtaposition of the well-mannered journalist Walser with Fevvers, the circus woman of shocking improprieties is greatly humorous. In the Interview Scene, Carter degrades the journalist in terms of Fevvers’ grotesquery, particularly her boisterous farting, farting which is a carnivalesque gesture of mockery and debasement. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque is the basis of all abuses, uncrowning, and degradation.

Fevver’s foster mother, Lizzie, is another carnivalesque character in the novel. Throughout the interview, she unscrupulously observes Walser. A

London-born Italian, Lizzie, has a ‘dark brown voice.’ With its ‘curious accent’ and its “double barrelled diphthongs and glottal stops” (*Nights* 7), hers is a variety of unofficial English quite unfamiliar to Walser. She was a prostitute prior to joining the circus. She, too, is grotesque in appearance:

Lizzie was a tiny, wizened, gnome-like apparition who might have been any age between thirty and fifty; snapping, black eyes, sallow skin, an incipient moustache on the upper lip and a close-cropped frizzle of tri-coloured hair...bright grey at the roots, stark grey in between, burnt with henna at the tips. The shoulders of her skimpy, decent, black dress were white with dandruff. She has a brisk air of bristle, like a terrier bitch.

There was ex-whore written all over her. (*Nights* 7)

Lizzie has no respect for the institution of marriage. When he refers to society’s increasingly empathetic attitude toward prostitution and claims that he himself has known some pretty, decent whores “whom any man might have been proud to marry” (*Nights* 13), Lizzie bursts into laughter and furiously retorts: "Marriage? Pah! Out of the frying pan into the fire! What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many? No different! D'you think a decent whore'd be proud to marry *you*, young man?Eh?" (*Nights* 13).

Lizzie, with her abject status as a prostitute, and with her insipient moustache and ageing body, exemplifies the Bakhtinian grotesque body. But

it is through her that Carter castigates the patriarchal institution of marriage and subverts the notions of motherhood. From a feminist standpoint, Lizzie, in her aversion to marriage, represents the first strand of feminism during the Victorian era. Her role as the foster-mother of Fevvers is significant. For, inherent in it is Carter's disruption and redefinition of the traditional monolithic concept of motherhood.

Fevver's dressing room in Alhambra music hall where the scene of the interview is set is a chronotope. It is messy and has a touch of the marketplace about it. Its "smell of perfumes, sweat, greasepaint, and raw, leaking gas (*Nights 8*)" makes the room stingy. The champagne bottles are stored in a toilet jug packed with ice bought from fishmongers and a fishy smell pervades the room. The room is "as mean as a kitchenmaid's attic" (*Nights 8*). It looks like "the aftermath of an explosion in a *corsetiere's*" (*Nights 8*). Fevver's huge self-advertising posters with the message on them '*Toujours, Toulouse,*' scrawled on them are also seen there. Her framed photographs figure among the unguents on her dressing-table. There are also Parma violet sweets stuffed in a jam jar. It is in this odd ambience that the interview goes on. Marketplace images like eating, drinking, laughing, farting, and frank and uninhibited language characterise the scene, making the interview into an affair of fun, a carnivalesque event. Bakhtin says:

The marketplace ...was a world in itself...with the atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity....The marketplace was

the centre of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained with the people. (*Nights* 154)

The world Carter constructs for the circus artist, the ex-prostitute and the journalist to converse in is identical with the world of the Bakhtinian marketplace.

In the novel, Ma Nelson's Whorehouse also functions as a chronotope where the accent is categorically on the Bakhtinian material lower bodily stratum. It is a venue where uninhibited celebrations of bodily pleasures go on and prostitutes become performers earning their livelihood by a gross violation of the laws of morality. The whorehouse is subversively called "the academy". Fevvers proudly tells Walser: "Nelson's academy accommodated those who are perturbed in their bodies and wished to verify that, however equivocal, however much they cost, the pleasures of the flesh were, at bottom, splendid" (*Nights* 44). Ma Nelson, the owner of the house, is herself a whore. She is grotesque but is crowned. Though one-eyed her vision is as sharp as a needle; she is always as neatly and trimly dressed as an Admiral's uniform. Jokingly she often refers to the whorehouse as "a tight little ship", "a pirate ship" (*Nights* 20). It is Ma Nelson who discovers the powers of Fevvers's grotesque lump. She hopes Fevvers "must be the pure child of the century that just now waiting in the wings, the New age in which no women will be bound

to the ground” (*Nights* 25). It is Nelson who transforms Fevvers’ physiological anomaly into a physiological wonder. Deserted by her parents who drops her in the laundry basket kept at the doorstep of the whorehouse, Fevvers grows up there under the protection of a dozen mothers like Ma Nelson, Lizzie and others. One day, when Lizzie is bathing the seven-year old Fevvers, Nelson sees the child’s protruding and growing lumps and deliriously exclaims: “Cupid! Here is our very own Cupid in living flesh” (*Nights* 16). Later, both of them dress Fevver accordingly. They put a wreath of pink cotton on her head and give her a toy bow and an arrow. In this garb, Fevvers poses as a *tableau vivant* or a living picture in the drawing room of the house entertaining the clients. At the age of fourteen, when Fevvers reaches her puberty and begins to menstruate, she poses “The winged Victory of Samothrace” (*Nights* 18), with its allusion to Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. These enactments are, indeed, carnivalesque travesties and spectacles. More importantly, the images of Fevvers as Cupid and Nike are festive images signifying the coming of what is new. They are congruent with Bakhtin’s conception of popular festive images:

These images saturated with time and the utopian future, reflecting the people’s hopes and strivings, now became the expression of the general gay funeral of the old power and old truth. (*Rabelais* 99)

Ma Nelson and Lizzie's vision of life is futuristic and carnivalesque. They never look at Fevver's grotesque body negatively. Instead, they empower her, teach her to recognize and use the powers of her body. They even train her in "the art of flying". Ma Nelson believes in the power of time. At one point she asserts: "Time himself the father of transfigurations, was the greatest of artists, and his invisible hand must be respected at all costs" (*Nights* 26). Her carnivalesque world view is what informs her admiration for the grotesque union between Leda and the Swan. When, pointing to the portrait "Leda and the Swan" hanging above the mantelpiece of the whorehouse, Fevvers asks her to explain its meaning, Ma Nelson says: "It was the demonstration of the blinding access of the grace of flesh" (*Nights* 27). This is Ma Nelson's endorsement of the pleasures of the flesh.

Carter uses Ma Nelson's carnivalesque whorehouse as a foil to officialdom, profaning and subverting, its high ideals. It is significant that, in the novel, the whorehouse is also repeatedly referred to using the term 'house.' This is a stylistic device Carter uses to subvert the general negative attitude toward a brothel. Subversion of officialdom becomes more evident in some of Fevvers' statements. For instance, she tells Walser: "You could not look at Mother Nelson's house without the thought, how the age of Reason built it" (*Nights* 19). She also adds: "The house was a place in which rational desires might be rationally gratified" (*Nights* 19). In other words, the whorehouse and its function are perfectly in tune with human rationality. The

terms in which it is described are particularly interesting. The house has a marble staircase that goes up with a flourish like “a whore's bum” (*Nights* 15), and is adorned with classical images of “garlands of fruit, flowers and the heads of satyrs” (*Nights* 15). The staircase has also a “marvellous banister of wrought iron” (*Nights* 15). The drawing room is “as snug as a groin” (*Nights* 15). The picture gallery with its oil paintings treating mythological subjects is unclean. These pictures, Lizzie tells Walser, were gifted to Ma Nelson by a “bloke” (*Nights* 17) because “he liked her on account of how she shaved her pubes” (*Nights* 17). There is also a big library willed to Ma Nelson by another client, a Scottish gentleman. A library usually is a symbol of official, elite culture. As such, its presence in the whorehouse is intended to mock the pretensions and affectations of officialdom. A parodic debunking of high art and culture is done through the lower bodily stratum. The images of ‘bum’, ‘groin’ and ‘pubes’ are effectively used for this purpose. Carter’s use of parody in the novel, particularly in her description of Ma Nelson’s whorehouse has been commented on by Linda Hutcheon in her *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). For instance, she finds in the story of Leda and the Swan as used by Carter a feminist parody which makes Fevvers a plain fact, the female paradigm. She adds:

The novel’s parodic echoes... function as do those of Yeats’ poetry when describing a whorehouse full of bizarre women....They are all ironic feminizations of traditional or

canonic male representations of the so called generic human—
‘Man’. (94)

Carnavalesque images of death and birth are also central to the depiction of the whorehouse. The old fashioned house with its fading and crusted pictures of mythological figures is symbolic of the death of the old. Fevvers, who masters the art of flying, and the prostitutes, who are suffragists and who empower themselves in various ways, signify the birth of the new.

The treatment of the sudden death of Ma Nelson acquires more of significance in this context. Her women courageously come out and give her a grand funeral in public. With their “...black plumes and mutes with chiffoned toppers” they constitute a carnivalesque spectacle and their venture becomes a radically novel move. Fevvers says: “White chapel ain't never seen such a sight before or since! The cortège followed by droves of grieving whore” (*Nights* 33). The women recognise that with Ma Nelson’s death life will no longer be the same for them and that a phase of their life is coming to an end. When they are evicted from the house by an unnatural brother Ma Nelson’s they are not frustrated or defeated. For, they are now women, reborn, ready to move ahead and live independently. They would not even yield to meekness. So, shocked and infuriated by the suddenness of the eviction and also by the fact that it has been brought about by a kin of Ma Nelson’s herself, they do rise in protest, a protest that assumes a carnivalesque dimension. Ritually, they anoint the walls of the house with oil and Lizzie strikes a match and sets

fire to the house, symbolically putting an end to their old way of life. They all leave behind the “repository of bittersweet memories...of whoring and sisterhood (*Nights* 36).” Without much difficulty they all find other jobs. Ma Nelson’s academy has prepared them to adapt to changes.

A striking example of the Bakhtinian grotesque body can be seen in Carter’s representation of Madame Schreck’s museum of women monsters. Fevvers finds employment as an exhibit here. Madame Schreck’s collection is one of freaks whom she uses to make money. The museum is, in fact, a brothel. It is interesting to note here that Ma Nelson’s whorehouse is called an academy and Madame Schreck’s museum a brothel. The euphemisms are both ironic and humorous. The women in Schreck’s museum are monsters in the sense that they are all unusual and non-normal beings with strange physical features. In terms of their grotesque bodies, they are deviants from the norm. They have funny nicknames, too. They include Sleeping Beauty who fell asleep when her first menses started, Wiltshire Wonder who is a dwarf, less than three feet in height, Albert/Albertina who is a bipartite, Fanny the Four Eyes, and Cobweb. They have their own varied histories. Carter’s concern with her (storicism) is evident in the act of these women narrating these histories to each other. These women are imaged as what Mary Russo calls “female grotesques”. For Russo, the female grotesque body is without bounds and it subverts categories.

The old lady Madame Schreck is not only grotesquely portrayed but also degraded. She is an ‘agelast.’ Her voice is like “wind in the graveyard” (*Nights* 44) .She is called ‘Lady of terror’. Fevvers says that her name is “never accompanied by guffaws, leers, nudges in the ribs, but by bare, hinted whispers of the profoundly strange, of curious revelations ...”(*Nights* 42). She started out her career as “a Living Skeleton, touring the side shows, and always was a bony woman”(*Nights* 45). Now, she is old and wears a black dress and a thick veil like a Spanish widow. She travels in a black horse carriage and she has a mute black-male servant. Her Museum is for the rich men of Kensington. Fevvers’ impressions about her are of note here:

...it was all so much show, the black carriage, the mute, the prison chill, all the same she had some quality of the uncanny about her, over and above the illusion, so you did think that under those lugubrious garments of hers you might find nothing but some kind of wicked puppet that pulled its own strings.
(*Nights* 45)

The museum, which is actually an old house, has a grotesque structure. It is gothic in style. The Museum functions, downstairs in what was once a wine cellar. It has “sort of a vault or crypt above with wormy beams overhead and nasty damp flagstones underfoot” (*Nights* 47). This place is called by the names “Down Below”, or “The Abyss” (*Nights* 49), names which echo

Bakhtinian topographical lower bodily stratum. All the freaks, except sleeping beauty have to stand and pose in niches of stone cut out of the slimy walls. Sleeping Beauty always remains prone. In front of every niche there is a curtain and in front of each niche there is a burning lamp. “My profane alters” (*Nights* 49), is what Madame Schreck calls them. The Abyss the Bakhtinian downward movement, strikes an analogy between the lowness of the freaks’ status and the lowness of their underground locale. Both represent the bodily lower stratum. There is also a carnivalisation of the participants of the museum, which ironically and subversively evokes the marketplace. The women become commodities to be viewed, bought and sold; Madame Schreck becomes a saleswoman displaying her commodities; the visiting male clients become the buyers.

Laughter and grotesque degradation are prominent features of Carter’s depiction of Madame Schreck’s male clients, too. The men who came to Madame Schreck’s are one and all quite remarkable for their ugliness” (*Nights* 47). They are necrophiliacs, sadists, and sexual perverts. Carter images them as sexual clowns, comic performers of sex. When they visit the museum, they change their attire. They pick from the theatrical costumes kept in the wardrobe and wear them. For instance, one man chooses and puts on the ballot dancer’s frock; another, “a judge” picks the “executioner’s hood” and, wearing it, performs ludicrous sexual acts:

There was a judge who comes regular always fancied that. Yet all he ever wanted was a weeping girl to spit at him. And he'd pay a hundred guineas for the privilege! Except, on those days when he'd put on the black cap himself, then he'd take himself off upstairs, to what Madame Schreck called the 'Black Theatre', and there, Albert/Albertina put a noose around his neck and give it a bit of a pull but not enough to hurt, whereupon he'd ejaculate and give him/her a fiver tip. (*Nights* 47)

The carnivalesque representation of the male clients is a degradation of Victorian morality and male sexuality. It exposes their sexual desires, fantasies and perversities. At the same time, it involves a comic reversal, too. It is not the women freaks but the men who become grotesque spectacles of carnality. In Linden Peach's view Carter's male characters epitomise the process of "desubjectivisation" (139). Citing her depiction of the judge as an example, he observes that: "for the judge, the experience of desubjectivisation is erotic, wearing his black cap and having a noose placed around his neck makes him ejaculate" (139).

The image of Christian Rosencreutz, one of Madame Schreck's wealthy client, is that of a grotesque clown. At the museum Fevvers' role is to play the "tombstone angel" (*Nights* 54). Sleeping Beauty will lie stark naked on the marble slab and Fevvers, spreading her wings, will stand at her

head, as Biblical “Angel of Death” (*Nights* 54). Rozencruez, who is infatuated with her, calls her “Azrael” Schreck sells Fevvers to him. He lives in a mansion of gothic architecture. When he first came to the Museum, he looked like a joker in his plum-coloured velvet frock trimmed with grey fur and in his leather boots “with little bells at the ankles that rang out” (*Nights* 55) when he walked. Around his neck was a gold chain with a big solid gold medallion dangling from it. Also, engraved on the medallion was the figure of a phallus. There were also wings attached to its testicles. A middle-aged man with thin features, he has a high and crooked nose and shaven cheeks. He also wears a big, round, drum-like beaver hat. “Phallus” and “nose” are, for Bakhtin, markers of sexuality. They belong to the lower bodily stratum and have been traditionally linked: “In both antique and medieval grotesque the nose had usually this link with the “phallus” (*Rabelais* 87). These idiosyncrasies and physiological oddities are devices used to “travesty the serious and make it ring with laughter” (*Rabelais* 87).

Rozencruez buys Fevvers and takes her to his mansion by force. He addresses her using different mythical and Biblical names such as Azreal, Flora, and Venus Pandemos. His mansion also becomes a delightful chronotope, like Fevvers’ dressing room, Ma Nelson’s Whorehouse, and Madame Schreck’s Museum, for carnivalesque subversions. His sexuality and his “fertility rites” (*Nights* 61) are treated in a mock-ritualistic and humorous way. He believes that through his physical union with Azreal, the angel of

Death, he can regain youth and even betray death. He begins his ritual with a riddle. Fevvers must, after taking bath, come out of water “neither naked nor clothed” (*Nights* 59). She emerges out of water, covering her body with her long hair like Lady Godiva, thereby easily solving the riddle. The reference to Lady Godiva is significant here. Godiva was the legendary thirteenth century countess of Marcia. She used her body to protest against the oppressive taxes imposed by her husband on his people. She rode on a horse through the streets naked only partially covering her body with her long hair. Fevvers success with the riddle is tantamount to the crowning of woman and the powers of her body. Male sexuality is uncrowned through a grotesque caricature of Rosencreutz’s behaviour. At the final stage of his ritual, he reads out passages from the book, “*Mysterium Baphometis Revelatum*”(Nights 59). In his “ecstatic reveries”, he babbles, sings, flings the casement open, and jumps up to turn off the lights. Amused by his antics Fevvers teases him: “You mind your bare head or you will catch your death” (*Nights* 64). At this, he grows angry and wild and jumps, authoritatively, on her with his “sex magic” (*Nights* 64). Fevvers escapes through the open casement, flying like a bird.

In *Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (2002), Dani Cavallaro says: “*Nights at the Circus* explores... the connection between psychological darkness and perverse sexual desires that hinge on the reification of the female body”(55). The museum and the mansion, with their formidable appearance, and the grotesque quixotic clothes of Madame

Schreck and Rosencruetz are symbolic of this darkness and of the sexual monstrosities and predatory instincts underlying the Victorian era which, in the name of morality, suppressed and confined female body. Carter subverts the traditional and stereotypical notions of female body, femininity, and womanhood. This is done through parodying the classical fairy tale models. The women of the museum are rescued by Fevvers, not by any chivalrous prince. She murders Madame Schreck and liberates them. These scenes showing these incidents also contest the notion of the normal, carnivalesquely erasing the contradistinctions generally made between the normal and the non-normal. These museum and mansion are symbolic images suggesting the bodily lower stratum. In the novel, they function as the equivalence of the Bakhtinian “carnavalesque hell” (*Rabelais* 395):

The carnivalesque hell affirmed earth and its lower stratum as the fertile womb, where death meets birth as a new life springs forth. This is why the images of the material bodily lower stratum pervade the carnivalised underworld. (395)

Rosencratz and Madame Schreck are all “carnavalesque dummies” (*Nights* 394) who represent the old, decaying world. As such, they are ridiculed and degraded as “gay monsters.” Fevvers’ escape from the mansion and the freaks’ escape from the museum are indices of their carnivalesque rebirth.

Colonel Kearney's American Circus is a crucial aspect of the novel. The title 'Nights at the Circus' is in itself an index of its importance. The circus with its artists travels to Russia. They camp in St. Petersburg. Fevvers, the trapeze artist, Buffo, the clown and his team of clowns, Lamark, the Ape-Man and the Educated apes he trains, Princess of Abyssinia, the tiger trainer, Mignon, the singer, and animals like Kearney's elephants, are all performers in the circus. Walser, who also has joined the circus, more or less as a clown, with his mission of learning more about Fevvers is also with them. Marketplace imagery, grotesque body, laughter, and popular festive images are familiar features of the circus, a carnival chronotope. Bakhtin points out:

The comic performers of the marketplace were an important source of the grotesque image of the body. They performed a huge and motley world that we can only touch upon here. All these jugglers, acrobats, vendors of panaceas, magicians, clowns, trainers of monkeys, had a sharply expressed grotesque bodily character...this character has been most fully preserved in the marketplace shows and in the circus. (*Rabelais* 353)

The circus also provides a venue for abject and peripheral people like the deformed, the runaways, the bizarre, the outcasts, and even animals. It also becomes an itinerant spectacle in which the notion of the abnormal gets reviewed and redefined. It also functions as a carnivalesque apparatus to

explore issues such as gender, capitalism, and power-politics. Kearney describes his circus as “A Ludic Game” and the grand “Imperial Tour”(*Nights* 250) Most of the major characters in the novel are circus artists and workers. The circus ring is represented as a microcosm of the world. Nevertheless, there is an ambivalence underlying it since it is simultaneously a “carnavalesque heaven” and “carnavalesque hell”. In a sense, this contraction explains Carter’s use of the praise- abuse technique to describe it:

above the performers' entrance hung a gilded platform for the band. All was elegant, even sumptuous.... But the aroma of horse dung and lion piss permeated every inch of the building's fabric, so that the titillating contradiction between the soft, white shoulders of the lovely ladies whom young army officers escorted there and the hairy pelts of the beasts in the ring resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk and civet revealed themselves as common elements. (*Nights* 80)

The circus may be viewed as an instance of the capitalist commercialization of Victorian entertainment forms. Carter is, indeed, critical of capitalist tendencies. As such, she also draws attention to what Linden Peach calls “the pursuit of profit and...oppression of subordinates” (*Nights* 124) which often characterize the circus, too. The transnational movement of

Kearney's circus troupe by train may be symbolically suggestive of the agenda of the global expansion of capitalist imperialism. The subsequent train wreck may be symptomatic of the eventual collapse of this imperialism. But, what follows the wreck also unequivocally embodies Carter's vision that the carnivalesque and its festivities will never come to an end. Commenting on Carter's use of the circus, Linden Peach aptly observes:

At one level, the circus in the novel is a symbol of hierarchical and patriarchal society which carnival mocks and mimics with its... pursuit of profit and its oppression of subordinates.... However, the circus is also the focus for an alternative carnivalesque, which, like the popular fairs, to which Bakhtin refers, demystifies and debunks the established social hierarchy, including its own. (124)

In the novel, Carter exploits the potential of the circus, an unmistakable symbol of carnival festivities, to reinforce its carnivalesque aspect and impact. The clowns in the circus are all masked performers. And their actions are both comic and subversive. The Clowns' Alley, where they live, has the atmosphere of a "madhouse" (*Nights* 88) The master clown, Buffo is huge in size seven feet in height: "He is a big man...so that he makes you laugh when he trips over little things. His size is half the fun of it, that he should be so very, very big and yet incapable of coping with the simplest techniques of

motion” (*Nights* 88). He is known as “Buffo the great, the terrible Buffo, and the hilarious, appalling, devastating Buffo” (*Nights* 88). He has a white round face, wide rouge rings around his eyes, a four cornered mouth and a conical cap. This countenance in itself is his regular mask. Bakhtin identifies mask as a complex and an integral ingredient of folk culture:

Mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (*Rabelais* 256)

Buffo has solemn conception of the clown. He tells Walser that a clown is a monster, a wonder, and a marvel, who can “teach little children the *truth* about the filthy ways of the filthy world” (*Nights* 122). His costume is designed in such a way that he can invert his body, making its upper parts seem the lower. His cap is, in fact, a bladder: “He wears his insides on his outside and a portion of his most obscene and intimate insides, at that; so that you might think he is bald, he stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally stores piss (*Nights* 74)”. In a “violent slapstick” Buffo burns

the clown policemen alive. He also plays the role of a crazy priest officiating at the clowns' wedding. The policemen and the priest are arms of officialdom and they are debunked. The routine shows on the circus arena include the "Clowns' Christmas Dinner" and "The Clowns' Funeral" (*Nights* 78). Carnavalesque images of eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, and death are a dominant presence in these performances. Buffo also carries out a "convulsive self-dismemberment" (*Nights* 117) by shaking his masked face. He shakes out his teeth and shakes off his nose and eye balls. At the "Clowns' Christmas dinner", he performs the role of Christ. At the "Clowns' funeral" (*Nights* 118), he mimics his own death. The show becomes funny when the other clowns bring a large coffin, but Buffo does not fit into it. So they comically dismember him, cut him down to the size of the coffin with a rubber knife. He is soon resurrected, and he double somersaults and stands erect making his audience laugh uproariously. Ben Urish observes that clowns become highly humorous figures, for they are "socially licensed to cross the boundaries of culturally sanctioned behaviours"(316)

Bakhtin says that clowns exist "on a borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were" (*Nights* 8). The London born, Cockney speaking, Buffo's real name is George Buffins. Both on the ring and in real life, he is a grotesque figure. He drinks excessively and always carries bottles of alcohol in his pockets. Habitually, he drinks alcohol and pisses it against the wall. He laughs and tells Walser: "The clown may be a source of mirth,

but-- who shall make the clown laugh?" (*Nights* 90) In the Clowns' Alley, at dinner time, in the kitchen, Buffo with the musical clowns, Grik and Grok, who are twins, and also with a number of other clowns, perform their usual strange dance, called "the bergomask, the dance of buffoons" (*Nights* 94). They make merry, laughing, somersaulting, and pelting one another with leftover food. They even mime acts of obscene violence:

A joey thrust the vodka bottle up the arsehole of an august; the august, in response, promptly dropped his tramp's trousers to reveal a virile member of priapic size. At that, a second august, with an evil leer, took a great pair of shears out of his back pocket and sliced the horrid thing off but as soon as he was brandishing it in triumph above his head another lurid phallus appeared in the place of the first, this one bright blue with scarlet polkadots and cerise testicles, and so on, until the clown with the shears was juggling with a dozen of the things. (*Nights* 100)

This slapstick is a celebration of the lower bodily stratum; it debasingly makes a spectacle of the phallus. It is "a dance of disintegration, and of regression; celebration of the primal slime" (*Nights* 95). One day, while performing the "Clowns' Christmas Dinner" (*Nights* 96) on the ring, Buffo makes an attempt to murder Walser who poses the "human chicken." (*Nights*

96) At first, no one understands his behaviour; everyone laughs seeing it as part of the show. Soon, it all becomes more farcical and melodramatic as Walser jumps up and starts running and Buffo frantically chases him with a knife. In reality, Buffo has gone mad and is later taken to a mental asylum. Ironically enough, his career ends grotesquely. Through this episode, the normal conception of clowns and clowning is subverted. Buffo turns out to be a killer clown. In his psychology, good and evil, humour and horror are mixed. It is this incongruity that makes him “a comic monster” and a carnivalesque figure. His mask is nothing but a disguise which enables him to act according to his own rules and designs. As such, his gestures are unpredictable and contrary to others’ expectations. Commenting on the fusion of horror and humour as a technique, Noel Carroll says: “A fusion of horror and humour is effectively used by writers and film makers. It inverts both the conventions of horror genre and comic genres.” (235)

Mignon, the Ape-man’s battered wife, is a remarkable example of carnivalesque rebirth in the novel. A fourteen-year-old girl of German origin, she is thin, bony, and bare footed, with eyes big and round like “millstones (*Nights* 97).” She has a light skin which is “as empty as a basket” (*Nights* 97) and is full of dark marks and bruises on it. Adenoidal, she breathes through her mouth. And, all that she can claim is “a pale undernourished, unhealthy prettiness” (*Nights* 96). Hers is a body torture has rendered grotesque:

Mignon's skin was mauvish, greenish, and yellowish from beatings. And, more than the marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruise, it was as if she had been beaten flat... or beaten to the thinness of beaten metal; and the beatings had beaten her back, almost, into the appearance of childhood, for her little shoulder blades stuck up at acute angles, she had no breasts and was almost hairless but for a little flaxen tuft on her mound. (*Nights* 99)

Mignon's has been a life of grotesque and carnivalesque experiences. When she is six, her father murders her mother, goes mad, and drowns himself. She absconds from the orphanage where she is put. She has been a flower girl in the market. She has stolen food, clothing, and other things and slept "in passages, under bridges and in shop doorways" (*Nights* 99). She also becomes a pickpocket with the "accidental children of the city" or "the children of the lower depths of the city" (*Nights* 99). In their company, she finds happiness. During winter, they take refuge in a deserted warehouse and make bonfires to warm themselves. They quarrel childishly, play games like "tag, hide-and-seek, and jump-across the embers" (*Nights* 100). One day, the bonfire burns the warehouse down. Some children die. For Mignon, a short carnivalesque life ends here and she begins a new life with Herr.M, a spirit photographer who is impressed by "her great resemblance to a specter" (*Nights* 102). At his instance, she impersonates the dead. Wearing a white night gown and keeping

a torch light under it, she happily poses for photographs: “It had never been more than a game to her” (*Nights* 104). After she is caught by the police and is acquitted, she works in a bar. And, it is here that she meets the drunkard Ape-Man, Lamark. Attracted by circus, she goes with the Ape-Man and becomes his wife. This marks the beginning of her “carnavalesque hell” (*Nights*130). From the third day of her marriage, he regularly beats her “as though she were a carpet”. Even Carter’s description of her physical torture has a comic strain to it:

On the third day on the road, he beat her because she burned the cutlets. On the fourth day, he beat her because she forgot to empty the chamber-pot and when he pissed in it, it overflowed. On the fifth day, he beat her because he had formed the habit of beating her. On the sixth day, a roustabout got her down on her back behind the freak-show. The beating was now an expectation that was always fulfilled. (*Nights* 105)

Mignon, even develops a relationship with Samson, the Strong Man, but is abandoned by him to be at the mercy of a hungry tiger. Seeing the tiger out on the ring while they are having sex, he leaves her there and flees, naked. Later, she is beaten to pulp and is thrown away half naked on to the winter streets by Lamark, her husband. Helped by Walser and Fevvers, she is reborn. She leaves her husband and her lover both and begins to live with the tiger-trainer,

Princess of Abyssinia. A girl of African origin, the Princess trains and tames tigers and makes them dance on the ring, while she plays her piano. Mignon can also sing and her songs deeply move others. On their first meeting, the girls smile at each other and clasp their hands, “one white hand and one brown” (*Nights* 129). They kiss and embrace to become ardent lovers and construct their utopia in a homosexual relationship. They speak different languages, but they communicate through music. Mignon also learns tiger-taming and on the ring, the twin cat-tamers stand with the beasts, playing, singing, and dancing.

Mignon’s life is a “grotesque swing” (*Rabelais* 371) which brings together heaven, earth and hell. Her life goes through a number of shifts, ups and down. Yet she never loses her spirits. Her process of becoming, renewal, and rebirth is expressed through popular festive imagery. Her acts of selling flowers in the market, and of stealing and pick-pocketing, and her strange professions and disguises exemplify this. She does not become a gloomy, cheerless victim but a strong-willed woman who consecutively makes a heaven out of hell through transgression. Her lesbian relationship, for instance, is both a protest and subversion.

Uncrowning of men is an interesting aspect of the novel. The Ape-Man is a cuckold. Bakhtin says that “the cuckolded husband assumes the role of uncrowned old age, of the old year, and the receding winter. He is stripped

of his robes, mocked and beaten” (*Rabelais* 241). His degradation occurs when Mignon deserts him and starts a new life with the Princess. He is degraded by his own monkeys, too. In an extremely comic scene, the Professor monkey steals the Ape Man’s contract with the circus, reads it, and tears it into pieces. Then, wearing the Ape Man’s overcoat, Professor monkey goes straight to Kearney and sitting next to him, sternly rejects the offer of tea, and writes on the notepad demanding permission to take over management of the “Educated Monkeys”(Nights). Professor monkey also demands as monthly salary, the same amount as is paid to the Ape-Man. Besides degrading the Ape-Man, this grotesque inversion of roles is also a crowning of the animal world. Another equally delightful instance of such inversion occurs when Professor monkey, during a rehearsal, forcefully strips Walser totally naked in order to teach anatomy to the Educated apes.

The grotesque body is pivotal to Carter’s portrayal of the Siberian Prison as well. A private asylum for female criminals, it was set up by Countess P who had poisoned her obese husband to death and later regretted it. Subsequently, she comes up with the idea of a prison for female criminals and with the government’s permission and a French criminologist’s help, she selects, from various Russian prisons, a group of women who are all guilty of murdering their husbands and have never repented. Countess P prompts them to build a prison for themselves in the Siberian wilderness. The prison is modeled on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon:

A hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed central courtyard; there was a round room, surrounded by windows. In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderers and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her (159).

The prison is called the “House of Correction” (*Nights* 161). It is a penitentiary, “a machine designed to promote penitence” (*Nights* 161). Its inmates have to live in complete loneliness meditating upon their crime. They are not allowed to speak and they are always under the surveillance of the Countess who “intended to look at them until they repented” (*Nights* 162). Books, pens, and mails are forbidden to them. In addition, the wilderness makes it impossible for families and relatives to visit them. Since the prison has no windows, they are completely shut out from the world outside. The life of the female prison wardresses is equally odd. When they delivered meals to each inmate, they have to wear hoods to conceal their faces, except their eyes. The Countess “wanted them to remain anonymous instruments, to exhibit no personal qualities that might obtrude upon the isolation of each inmate” (*Nights* 179). They, too, are not allowed to speak to, or to have eye contact with the inmates. So, they focus their eyes on the ground and never lift them when they serve food to the inmates or when they unlock the cell to let them out for their routine exercise. The bell which rings to announce meal time or

exercise time alone breaks the eerie stillness of the place and brings a festive feel into the minds of both the inmates and the wardresses. For, it is during this time that they develop their silent intimacies. The bell is a popular festive image. For Bakhtin, its ringing is a sign of “rebirth”, of the advent of the new. And, such a rebirth takes place at the material bodily level. For instance, a strange and secret relationship is born between the inmate Olga Alexandreva and the wardress, Vera Andreyevna. One day, while Vera is serving food, Olga dares to touch her gloved hands. For the first time, their eyes meet: “Desire, that electricity transmitted by the charged touch of Olga Alexandrovna and Vera Andreyevna, leapt across the great divide between the guards and the guarded” (*Nights* 139). One day Olga finds a note secretly tucked into her bread roll by Vera. As there is no paper or pencil with her she uses, grotesquely enough, her menstrual blood and even her excreta as ink to reply. Carter describes her grotesque act:

She dipped her finger in the flow, wrote a brief answer on the back of the note she had received and delivered it up to those brown eyes that now she could have identified amongst a thousand, thousand pairs of brown eyes, in the immutable privacy of her toilet pail. (*Nights* 139)

The seeds of desire, love, and life sown by Olga and Vera spread from cell to cell. They communicate through glances and also through notes, drawings and signs on rags of clothes and scheme to put an end to their suppressed life.

They discover the power of their transgressive bodies and are reborn through their lesbian liaisons. Both excreta and menstrual blood are elements of the lower bodily stratum. Excrement is an ambivalent image and is related to renewal and regeneration. It has a “special role in overcoming fear” (*Rabelais* 175). The inmates and wardresses of the prison, eventually, make up an “army of lovers” (*Nights* 189), crashing through all their walls and barriers. One day, when the cells are unlocked for the regular exercise, they rise in mutiny against the Countess, and lock her up inside. Deliriously, the wardresses pull off their hoods and the lovers hug and kiss. Then, they all leave the prison and run off into the forest.

The world of Carter’s Siberian prison is profoundly grotesque. Nonetheless, it serves as a productive chronotope for the inmates and guards. Mustering courage, the women use their bodies as instruments of protest and rebellion. It brings about shifts in their identities. They create alternative homo-erotic relationships, subverting patriarchy’s hetero-normative sexuality. Carter’s treatment of lesbianism is, obviously, carnivalesque. She celebrates it not only as an alternative form of sexual expression but a way of intimate female life as well. Adrienne Rich’s views on lesbianism are worth mentioning here. She critiques “compulsory heterosexuality” (239) and the vision of lesbianism as a deviant and perverse form of sexuality. For Rich, lesbianism is not a relationship restricted to sexual experience alone. It is also a relationship which embraces “many more forms of primary intensity

between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny”(239). In this sense, the lesbians of the Siberian prison, who create a new meaning for their existence, become what Rich calls a “lesbian continuum”(239).

The Siberian Forest scene is also remarkably carnivalesque. In the Siberian section of the novel, Kearney’s circus train, while crossing the Siberian forest, is attacked by a band of runaway convicts and the train is partially destroyed. The convicts take the circus crew, except Walser, to their encampment deep inside the forest. Fevvers is now extraordinarily famous and there is a rumour afloat that she is going to marry the emperor of Russia. The convicts believe that she can help them to meet the emperor. Fevvers convinces them that she cannot help them and that the rumour is but a lie spread by Kearney. Dismayed, the convicts indulge in a drunken mourning. Lizzie asks the clowns to do their routine performances and entertain the despondent convicts. They all sit around the bonfire, the clowns dance and somersault, and eat the victuals prepared by the convicts. Seeing the clownery the convicts begin to laugh shedding their sadness.

The image of the Shaman, who lives with the primitive Siberian villagers, also adds to the carnivalesque character of the Forest scene. The Shaman is an exorciser and a curer of mysterious diseases. He becomes a grotesque figure when, beating his drum, he performs his bizarre rites and rituals in great ecstasy. He is portrayed as a clown. Carter describes his

outlandish appearance as he darts through the forest:

A volatile figure with its jaw now lightly clad in silvery beard flits through the thicket, evidently impervious to cold, for it exhibits no discomfort although it is half naked since it has lost its trousers, its comedy suspenders and its wig. There are feathers of snowy owl, the goldeneye, the raven, stuck in his hair, along with burrs, thorns, twigs, mushrooms and mosses. This man looks as if both born in and born of the forest. (*Nights* 179)

It is in a primitive world that Walser, who has lost his memory in the train wreck, finds himself when he comes to the Shaman's habitat and watches his performance. He is no longer a "rational" and his brain is "disordered" (*Nights* 179). Like an innocent baby, he giggles at the pranks of the Shaman who is in communion with spirits and apparitions. The Shaman's eyes pop, his lips froth, and he falls down. The encounter between Walser and the Shaman gains in momentum when the Shaman sighs, rises and greets Walser mistaking him for a spirit whom he has summoned up by means of his spirit journey. He, then, speaks to Walser in the strange "Finno-Ugrian dialect" (*Nights* 180). Walser responds, like a prankster, touching and rubbing his stomach to indicate that he is hungry. Promptly, the Shaman urinates into a pot and offers it to his visitor. Walser drinks it. Forthwith, the "hallucinogenic

urine” (*Nights* 181) begins to work on him. His head and eye begin to spin around, memories flash through his mind and he starts babbling in an odd language which is unknown to the Shaman. Realising that his new visitor is not a spirit, the Shaman makes Walser his apprentice. Walser starts a new life with the Shaman and other forest dwellers. In the Shaman’s hut Walser plays with the bears and cubs; he participates in the rituals of bear sacrifice and in the feasting festivities popular among the forest people. Sitting inside the grotesque “god- hut” (*Nights* 190), where bear skulls have piled in a corner, he learns, from the Shaman, the art of bear sacrifice. He is transformed into a junior Shaman. A new shamanic costume is gifted to him. He wears it, gladly.

The clownish shaman, his gimmicks, urination, drinking of urine, clumsy body language, unintelligible communication, and hallucinations render the encounter between Walser and Shaman unmistakably carnivalesque. Walser’s degraded status, his rebirth after the train wreck, and his change into a Shaman are also elements of the carnivalesque. The primitive life of the Shaman and the villagers is described in a praise-abusive manner. Their life is simple and they love nature. But, they are ignorant and superstitious and live in an “entirely closed system” (*Nights* 192), subscribing to the Shaman’s idea of a hierarchical “cosmology.” The Walser-Shaman encounter also embodies the theme of the rational and the irrational. The boundary between the two concepts is blurred when Walser, after fully regaining memory, becomes a shaman. Metaphorically, it is a merger, a

reconciliation of the rational and the irrational. Perhaps, Carter is suggesting a re-consideration and redefinition of the twin concepts.

The Forest Scene, with which the novel closes, also projects a carnivalesque world with its outlaws, circus artists, the shaman, animals, and the primitive folk. It is a heterogeneous world of different people, languages, cultures, rituals, habits, and sexual preferences. In a sense, what is shown through the scene is a carnivalesque rebirth and renewal. For instance, Walser's experiences renew him and he learns a new system of signification. Fevvers forfeited her status as bird-woman and her wings are broken. She now looks uglier and more grotesque. But there is nothing artful about her. She looks more natural, more of a part of nature. She has even lost her gaudy circus costumes. It is significant that Lizzie makes new fur clothes for the circus artists made out of bear skin. The lesbian lovers hope to set up a "female utopia" (*Nights* 220). The bond between Mignon and the Princess grows stronger. Mignon sings and the Princess plays music and their music reverberates through the entire Siberian wilderness:

Under the influence of the voice and piano, all the wilderness was stirring as if with a new life. Came a faint shimmer of bird-song and whirring as of wings. Soft growls, mews, and squeaks of paw on snow. And, a distant crack or two, as if the ice in the river had broken up in ecstasy. (*Nights* 162)

Fevvers meets Walser at the god hut. The other circus artists also join them. Fevvers and Walser decide to live together as they are “far away from churches and priests.” Carter is here subverting the traditional idea of religiously sanctioned marriage. At the end of the scene, Walser asks Fevvers why she had earlier lied to him that she was a bird woman. Laughing loudly, Fevvers answers, "I fooled you, then! Gawd, I fooled you."(*Nights* 237). She then starts "stuttering and hiccupping with mirth"(*Nights* 237). Seeing her laugh, others also start laughing:

Her laughter spilled out of the window and made the tin ornaments on the tree outside the god-hut shake and tinkle. She laughed so loud that the baby in the Shaman's cousin's house heard her, waved its little fists in the air and laughed delightedly, too. Although he did not understand the joke that convulsed the baby, the Shaman caught the infection and started to giggle. The bear panted sympathetically; he would have laughed if he could have. (*Nights* 238)

It is evidently a carnivalesque scene. The image is that of the circus artists singing, dancing, laughing, and making merry. The train wreck has not wrecked their carnivalesque spirit. It expresses itself in the forest, too. The emphasis on laughter is of significance here. Fevvers' laughter becomes a collective laughter. Everybody is involved. A little baby laughs, the Shaman

laughs, even the bear pants empathetically and would have laughed had it the capacity to do so. It is this idea that finds its expression in Carter's description of the impact of the song and music of Mignon and the Princess. The wilderness stirs with a new life, birds begin to sing, animals respond growling, mewling, and squeaking, and even the snow cracks in ecstasy. The carnival temper, Carter suggests, is innate in man; it is in tune with the laws of nature and is indestructible.

Conclusion

The carnivalesque is a conspicuous presence in the novels selected for study in this dissertation. Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter have each used it to great effect. They demonstrate that the Bakhtinian carnivalesque can function as a subversive, revisionist, and a liberating technique in the hands of the creative writer. The five novelists are deeply conscious of the contemporary world with its startling, complex realities. As such, they have found in the carnivalesque an effective tool to portray it. They all of them seem to suggest that human beings need not be helpless victims for good. A rebirth into a better world is possible. What is imperative is a carnivalesque vision of the world. Laughter and bodily transgressions can serve as potent tools for revising and redefining hackneyed and deep- entrenched notions about life, gender, society, language, body, culture, and history and for revolutionising and changing society. From a carnivalesque perspective, nothing stays in a state of being or stasis; everything is in a state of flux and in the process of becoming. The novelists disrupt the myth that the future is beyond human comprehension. They are optimistic about the world of the future.

Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter are social thinkers and commentators capable of treating serious issues in extremely playful ways.

Similarities in their language, imagery, and thematic concerns show that they have identical world views. Their language belongs to what Bakhtin calls ‘the various genres of the billingsgate’. Shouts, shrieks, curses, oaths, obscenities, abuses, are common to all of them. These elements are evocative of the language of the Bakhtinian marketplace and their use contributes to the creation of a folk atmosphere in the novels. For instance, In Ellison’s novel, Trueblood and Brockway speak the Southern Black dialect; In Roth’s novel, Portnoy uses pornographic language; Bama’s women characters speak the colloquial language of the paraiyas; in Carter’s novel, there is cockney English as well as the Shaman’s Finno-Ugrian language; in Basheer, most of the characters speak the regional dialect of the Muslim community. It is through the use of such language that the novelists mock and degrade the standard, canonical language of officialdom. Folk culture with its rituals can be seen in Carter’s depiction of Shamanism and in Bama’s portrayal of exorcism and church rituals.

Central to the novels studied is the celebration of the grotesque body. They celebrate bodies that eat, drink, urinate, fart, spit, and defecate. The scenes which describe such gestures are humorous; they subvert accepted norms of behaviour. These scenes celebrate misrule, indecency, irrational speech and behaviour, and bodies that indulge in excesses and transgressions. Masturbation and copulation depicted by Roth in the Bubble Girardy Episode, and the Roman Orgy Episode redefine sexual behaviour. Carter subverts,

through the figure of Fevvers, stereotypical notions about female body and female beauty. In the hands of both Roth and Carter, the grotesque body becomes a superb tool to subvert the official vision of the body. Ellison projects the grotesque body of his black protagonist and other black characters in such a way as to subvert white perceptions of blackness.

The carnivalesque in the novels under study offers a semiotic and symbolic theory rooted in the grotesque body and its gestures. The characters of Roth and Carter strikingly express it. The excessive sexual behaviour of Carter's prison inmates and of Roth's Portnoy exemplifies this. Their works are uncompromising critiques of rationalist ideologies and they open up alternative spaces for transgressive and subversive acts. These texts show that the carnivalesque is not merely a safety valve or survival strategy, but a force that can bring about upheavals and lead to renewal, rebirth, and regeneration for individuals as well as societies.

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is politically relevant. Its revolutionary potential is something that cannot be connived at. The influence of the carnivalesque can be seen in the way political activists usually stage their protest, using graffiti, posters, mimicry, parody, abusive slogans, and a host of subversive gestures. One such instance can be seen in Carter's *Siberian Prison*. Carter uses the word 'graffiti' to describe the way the prisoners communicate with the wardresses, using signs and symbols

etched with their bodily fluids. It is this that subsequently leads to their lesbian relationships and freedom. It may be said that carnivalesque anarchism can turn out to be a positive formula for effecting revolutionary changes. Bakhtin has noted this positive aspect of anarchic language and gestures which feature so prominently in Rabelais' works. For Bakhtin, Rabelais' male and female characters, Gargantua, Pantagruel, Panurge, Gargamella, and Sybil all possess this power of language. The carnivalesque is self-reflexive; it exposes its own follies and redefines itself. It critiques the civilised society with its institutional pomposities and pretensions and its subtle manipulation of power and control. Class, hierarchy, racism, and patriarchy come under its interrogative purview. Carnavalesque protest can parody all forms of official pretentiousness. This is exemplified, in *Invisible Man*, by Tod Clifton's selling of Sambo dolls and the beating of Supercargo by a group of drunken and psychotic veterans. The novelists humorously degrade the politics of government, administration, and medical profession in a laughter-provoking way. For instance, the election scene in *Sangati* mocks the government's corrupt ways. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison shows and degrades the power politics of the educational system through the figure of Bledsoe, the president and administrator of the college.

Roth, Ellison, Bama, Basheer, and Carter are carnivalesque novelists. In a sense, their novels embody a plea on behalf of closing the divide between high and low, elite and non-elite, literary and non-literary and demonstrate the

power of carnivalesque fiction to dismantle the canon. It may be said that it is difficult to label these writers, since their vision is inordinately pluralistic. This is a freedom they have created for themselves. They are anti-canonical, anti-classical, and anti-conventional. And, their narratives are fluid and ambivalent.

The strategies adopted by these novelists have certain things in common. They create different semantic levels in their texts and this is achieved through the various devices of the carnivalesque mode. The embedded meanings derive from their different socio-historical contexts. Intertwined with genres and literary traditions is a hybridization of styles, contexts, and times or chronotopes. This is a peculiarity of the carnivalesque mode. The carnivalesque trend in literature continues and is, indeed, pervasive. Nevertheless, what is remarkable about the novels under study is that they represent the triumph of the mode over the fixed, classical models by emphasising and celebrating the possibility of limitless styles and themes. The impossibility of delimiting the world and the creative process is also shown through their fusion of varied styles.

The carnivalesque in each of these novels underlines a positive philosophy. Life must go on not through 'death in life', but through 'life in death', through shifts and turns. The carnivalesque is all about the masquerade of life through historical progression, through rebirth and

renewal. The celebratory aspect of life is given priority over all forces of control and confinement.

In this context, it is important to remember that these novelists also seem to suggest that the carnivalesque spirit cannot be destroyed. The carnivalesque treatment of history resembles what Linda Hutcheon calls the historiographic metafiction. Official history is rewritten in a playful manner and from the point of view of the oppressed and marginalised. This leads to subversion as it creates new forms of histories including her(stories). Bakhtin has revived the tradition of laughter, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque. For him, mad laughter is productive and subversive. The novelists under study show various historical times which are relieved of their seriousness and are recreated as comic monsters in the course of events. Through its portrayal of the Victorian era, *Nights at the Circus* best exemplifies this. Likewise, in *Invisible Man*, the racial history of America is reconstructed through parodic inversion, irony, and mockery. Many world views, cultures and unofficial histories are come into focus. This creates a polyphony of voices, hybridization of cultures, which are basic to the carnivalesque. Through a convergence of these texts on the same plane, the Eurocentric world-view is destroyed.

The carnivalesque in literature, film, sartorial and culinary cultures offers a playground for competing and contradictory lives and attitudes. No

other medium than the carnivalesque in literature seems so equipped as to offer a space for understanding of men and matters. Ellison shows the collapse of political systems to make sense of the world. His rejection of Black Nationalism and Brotherhood ideas are significant in this regard. Here, the carnivalesque plays its role and offers a number of alternative ways to live and succeed. Laughter and masks are some of them.

Cultural differences in the carnivalesque forms have also been expressed by these writers. As an event, every carnival is culturally specific. When carnival found its place in literature, it was confronted with different historical, cultural, and literary traditions. Yet, it embraces all cultures and is universal. The narrative structure of the carnivalesque texts under study can also be viewed as a celebration of mini narratives. These texts clearly show the impossibility of meta-narratives. *Invisible Man* describes the very act of writing as a process of becoming. The self-reflexive moment of the carnivalesque begins there and is transformed into endless transitory events and images like those we see in a carnival procession. The protagonist author displays his/ her acute sense of observation of the world around him. It is clear that the author is absent as a controlling person or a detached narrator. Instead, he/she emerges as a participant through and through. The privileged position of the 'I' is critiqued or the 'I' is absent. In Bama's case, the autobiographic element in *Sangati* rejects the conventional autobiographical design. Instead of establishing the book as a single unified voice, *Sangati*

offers a plurality of voices and thereby makes the author-narrator a willing participant in the culture of the Paraiya community. In the case of *Nights at the Circus*, Carter's carnivalesque mode also celebrates multiple narratives through the various stories of the freaks of the museum preventing the production of a monologic and univocal truth and meaning. The same idea is reflected in Bakhtin's rejection of monologic theories. Carter brings together various strands of feminism such as marxist feminism, postmodern feminism, and power feminism to show the evolutions of both women and feminism as a continuous process of becoming without closure. These carnivalesque novels with such features as heteroglossia and polyphony blur all forms of linguistic distinction. This is done through allusions and parodies. These novels, thus, become a generative body of language and culture. The borders of narratives are broken. The self is decentred. The shifting of chronotopes in the novels is one of their delightful aspects.

The novelists have given vignettes of marketplace culture. None of them adopt an official point of view. All of them have put their finger on the negative as well as positive aspects of the people and culture represented in their works. Instead of focussing on the limitations of their marketplace culture, the novelists have stressed the progressive potential of their carnivalesque life. Everything is dialogically expressed from the common people's point of view. Like Rabelais, they strive to take a new look at the "official picture of events...to interpret the tragedy or comedy they

represented from the point of view of the laughing chorus of the marketplace” (*Rabelais* 439). The lies and the inflated seriousness of officialdom or the dominant class are laughed at and destroyed.

The carnivalesque in these texts has been examined in relation to their particular socio-cultural and political contexts. They all show their cultures’ basic struggle with officialdom. The important events which mark each novelist’s cultural contexts have already been pointed out. Roth and Carter grew up in an age which the West was witnessing rapid cultural and political changes. The American social landscape, during the days of Roth, was redefining itself under the impact of the youth counter culture, women’s rights movements, and a host of innovative lifestyles. By the time Carter was a young girl, England had declined as an imperial power and lost its hold on large parts of the world. Ellison lived in an age in which the Second World War, Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Arts Movement were bringing about surprising changes over the American socio-cultural and political scenario. Dalit Feminism and Dalit Christian Liberation movements had begun to slowly change the condition of paraiya dalit women by the time Bama published her novel. Basheer had lived through the tumultuous days of Indian Independence struggles, the partition, and also the two great World Wars. He had first-hand experience of what was happening as a result of these events. He was aware of the suffering and losses involved in the transnational flow of refugees. Various incidents and scenes in the novels under study echo

these historical events and their aftermath. The carnival chronotopes in each of these novels have grown out of the times in which the writers themselves have been participant performers, observers, or witnesses. Yet they all share a “folk universalism with concreteness, individuality, and a detailed presentation of living actuality” (*Rabelais* 438).

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