

# Carnavalesque Narrative Discourse in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: A Bakhtinian Reading

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**Abstract:** The Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term 'carnival' to describe a context in which the hierarchical voices are degraded and probably broken down; sometimes these voices are temporarily replaced by the marginalized voices in the context. The Bakhtin's carnival is actually supported by the idea of dialogism in which every voice could be heard without being suppressed in order to destroy the monologue which has only one dominant speaker. William Shakespeare's *King Lear* creates a context in which the position of the King and queens are degraded while they have always tried to create a monologue, and it is also shown that their decisions are not always right and truthful. The sense of the Bakhtinian carnival can be traced in this context where both the hierarchical and the lower voices come to the scene and blend together, as a result the hierarchical position is no longer in a higher place even if for a temporary moment. In this article such a carnivalesque context is going to be traced and extrapolated; as a result we can feel that the actual sense of carnival in this story is that the kings and queens should not be the only voices speaking throughout the context which may lead to a catastrophic monologue for everyone.

**Keywords:** carnivalesque narrative discourse, dialogism

## INTRODUCTION

As a multiple-voiced genre, novel has a potentiality of showing a variety of voices which usually tend to interact upon each other, this characteristic of novel is central to the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism. As Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in the description of a dialogic discourse states that "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (1984, p. 110). Bakhtin actually proclaims that in this dialogic discourse all the voices could be heard, but never a finalized atmosphere is going to be established where only one voice could be heard as the dominant one. Indeed, Bakhtin believes that man is constantly involved in a discourse of language games. As Joodaki and Shoostarian (2013, p. 130) assert, "language game is the system of rules and conventions which frame and

govern a particular discourse”. Nina Møller Andersen, “focuses on Bakhtin as a pragmatist, summarises the dialogical principles broadly: in relation to language, interaction, existence, and theories of polyphony, carnival and utterance” (Bostad et al, 2004, p. 66.)

'Unfinalizability' is another term used by Bakhtin to show that in a transparent reality we are dealing with a monologue in which there is only one dominant ideology, while in a dialogue we cannot expect to reach a finalized discourse (Bakhtin, 1984).

Founded upon this dialogism, Bakhtin's carnival comes to existence where different voices blend together or at least two voices come on the stage and the character who used to have the upper voice is no longer in his or her position because the marginalized characters find a space to express their voices and ideas. In his *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin asserts that:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (1984, p. 7-8).

Even kings might become beggars and beggars might become the king (Maleki, Hooti, 2011). This notion is in connection to the notion of dialogism in which every character's voice is being heard without being suppressed by the other characters, otherwise the dialogue turns to a monologue where only one dominant speaker reigns on the stage. As a result one of the main purposes of carnival is supplanting the hierarchical voice in a context that there is only one dominant source of power. Brandist (2002) opines:

Bakhtin traces the forms of carnival culture back to the comic festivals of antiquity, especially to Roman Saturnalia, which was considered a 'real and full (though temporary) return of Saturn's golden age to the Earth' (RW 7–8, TFR 12). He also suggests that festive forms go back even further, back into pre-history. In his discussion of the 'folkloric bases of the Rabelaisian chronotope', Bakhtin suggests that this temporary restoration of 'productive, generative time', which continues in carnival celebrations proper, can be traced back to the 'agricultural pre-class stage in the development of human society'. (p. 135)

According to Taylor (1995), Bakhtin puts the practices of carnival within different historical stages. The first stage is that of preclass and prepolitical society where, according to Bakhtin, 'the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally "official" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). In the second stage of Bakhtin's schema, then, we find a separation between serious and comic discourse, between the official culture of the ruling class and an unofficial folk culture. As a result, the official culture of the Middle Ages exorcised the trappings of comic imagery from their discourse. The third stage in Bakhtin's account is the Renaissance, the period in which he situates Rabelais. The Renaissance is marked by the collapse of feudal and Church authority, and the emergence of a new ruling class, the bourgeoisie. In order that this new class might supersede the old regime, a new form of discourse was required in which the orthodoxies of medieval ideology could be challenged. Finally, the fourth stage in

Bakhtin's schema takes us from the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. Just as feudal and theocratic power had consolidated itself through the creation of a serious, official cultural realm, so the bourgeoisie has sought to consolidate its position through the reorganisation of cultural forms. (pp.12-15)

In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, we witness the fall of the king and queens one after another, which brings to our mind the reason of these falls and the way these falls are depicted is dramatized. The king is the first to lose his hierarchical position, which is followed by the fall of his daughters as well. Each of them actually tries to suppress the oppositional voices in order to remain the dominant voice, but the context breaks this dominance down and finally it leads to their destruction. Following the Bakhtin's theories of carnival and dialogism, in this article we are going to trace the contextual fall of the hierarchies of those in power as a result of their monologic decisions. Actually, it is the context that provides their fall because of trying to establish their monologue, ignoring the voice of the other characters, and their insistence on denying the dialogue, although this insistence creates an ironic context of carnival in which the marginalized voices speak and deny the power of the king.

It is through this continuous falls that the hierarchical position of these characters are being exposed and revealed as weak which creates the sense of carnivalism. Actually, the contribution of this article is going to show the feeble and impotent position of these hierarchies and to implicate the terrible result of these monologues created by these hierarchies such as the king and the queen, which is done through the Bakhtinian carnivalesque discourse. Also the unstable position of hierarchical powers is justified through the unfinalizability of the characters in the context. This unfinalizability implicates the idea that no character could remain in the position of power for good (Bakhtin, 1986).

## DISCUSSION

In a dialogic discourse the idea of the sole dominant voice is denied and replaced by an air of dialogism, which is declared by Bakhtin in his *problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* as he says:

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire life in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium (1984, p. 293).

William Shakespeare actually tries to degrade the hierarchical position of rulers as the source of truthfulness through depicting continuous fallings of thrones which creates a carnivalesque narrative discourse throughout the whole play. Regarding this matter, Bakhtin avers:

Each dialogue takes place as if against a background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the

participants in the dialogue (partners)... The aforementioned third party is not any mystical or metaphysical being (although, given a certain understanding of the world, he can be expressed as such) - he is a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance, who, under deeper analysis, can be revealed in it (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 126-7).

As Bakhtin (1984) believes, as a result of every voice being heard, the foundation of carnival is based upon it; hierarchies are turned upon their heads and give their place to new voices within the story.

The first target in this context is the king who loses both his throne and sense. In this way we can feel the sense of dialogism that tries to destroy the king's position as the character who wants to be the only speaker throughout the play. This is firstly done by his youngest daughter by not expressing herself as her father expects her when he is dividing his kingdom between his daughters based on their expression of love that they have for their father, as she says:

*[aside] What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent.*

...

*Lear*

...

*Strive to be interested, what can you say to draw*

*A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak.*

*Cordelia Nothing, my lord.*

*Lear? Nothing?*

*Cordelia Nothing (Shakespeare, 2005, pp. 102-104).*

Actually she tries to undermine her father's hierarchy by not telling him what he wants to hear. Unlike her sisters, she destroys the monologue and turns this hierarchy on its head for a temporary but effective moment (Bressler, 2012). In this way she creates a dialogic discourse that could be best explained through this sentence from Bakhtin from his *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, according to him "Each rejoinder, regardless of how brief and abrupt, has a specific quality of completion that expresses a particular position of the speaker, to which one may respond or assume, with respect to it, a responsive position" (1986, p. 72).

On the other hand, there are some characters, who criticize the king for his monologic thinking and decisions. When the king tries to disinherit Cordelia, Kent asks the king to change his mind by saying that:

...

*When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?*

*Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak*

*When power to flattery bows?*

*To plainness honor's bound,*

*When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state, (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 107).*

He actually tries to create a carnival by weakening the king Lear's authorial position by criticizing his decision; he also uses some vocabulary in describing him that is not suitable to the position of king such as "mad", "old man", and "folly". He actually tries to warn him against his monologic way of making decisions and asks him to revise his decision. This statement undermines the position of king as the ultimate source of truth and decision making, and criticizes him publically, which adds to the effect of carnivalesque discourse along with his low vocabulary in describing the King.

Probably the best example of this kind of criticism through which the carnival is created and the hierarchies are shattered, is the king's conversation with his Fool in Act 1, Scene 4. The King has given away whatever he has got to two of his daughters and after being disrespected by one of his daughters' servants, the Fool enters the scene and starts mocking the King in a bitter way. As their dialogue (which also conveys a sense of dialogism) begins, the carnival begins too. Usually a fool is hired to entertain the king, but here the King has done something so stupid in the Fool's point of view that, even his Fool makes fun of him, and we can literary say that the King is degraded to the level that he is even being referred as more inferior to a fool. But in the first place, we should consider that when a fool starts talking to a king in a way to challenge his official decisions and actions, the king's hierarchy is being demolished and some sort of carnival happens.

King Lear had this intention that if he had given away his responsibility as a king to his daughters, he would have been able to spend the rest of his life in comfort and having fun with his one hundred knights hunting and having feasts, while having his daughters manage the affairs of the country, and he would have been able to still hold his title and court as the king. In this carnival, the Fool mocks this intentionality in two ways; the first is that he mocks his foolish thinking that after giving most of his power to his daughters, he can still hold his title without having any troubles, and on the second place, he mocks him because he has given away his power to only two of them, who were more hideous than the third one and literary exiled the youngest and the most honest one without listening to any advice.

By judging his actions, the Fool wants to degrade him as if he is inferior to a fool and the Fool is wiser than the King because he can see the reality, but the King cannot. So, he had actually made a terrible decision because of not being able to see the reality as a matter of raw and monologic thinking. As the Fool says:

*Fool's had ne'er less grace in a year,*

*Wise men are grown foppish,*

*And know not how their wits to wear,*

*Their manners are so apish (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 131).*

The Fool tries to show the King's stupidity and brings him down less than a fool as in another place he tells him that, "I have used it, nuncle, e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod and putt'st down thine own breaches," (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 131). He tells him that a great man such as Lear should not do such stupid things and "... go the fools among" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 131) by committing such mistakes. He also says that he wants to be anything but a fool because he is being whipped for keeping quiet or either telling the truth or lying, but he does not want to be such a fool such as Lear, so the King is even in a position worse than a fool, as the fool reminds him that before dividing his kingdom he should have worried about the possible calculations of his daughters. We can conclude that the Fool is trying to tell him that his decision in the first place to give away his power while being still alive was a wrong decision and now he literary has no power as he says, "I am a fool, thou art nothing" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 132).

As Kent introduces himself in his new disguise he says, "A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king" 9 (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 125), and the moment King Lear wants to hire Kent the Fool says that "let me hire him too. Here's my coxcomb" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 128). He is actually degrading the king again, because Kent had referred to himself as a poor man and compared himself to King Lear, so the Fool wants to hire him too because he is just as poor as the King (although Kent is ironic in this way). Fool actually tries to show that King is really poor and stupid in this way.

Later on, the Fool differentiates between a bitter and sweet fool. Actually even by teaching King Lear and showing him that he cannot see the reality, he is turning down his hierarchy. The Fool is not afraid of telling the truth to the King. The Fool describes the King as a sweet fool (stupid, the one who always says what his master needs to hear) and himself as a bitter one, because he is capable of seeing and telling the truth to some extent. As a result, the King's hierarchy is broken here; he is described as a fool, and a stupid fool who cannot see the truth while a fool can. King Lear gets angry when he calls him in that way, but in justification of his words, the Fool says that he has given all of his titles away, so he deserves to be called a fool.

And Goneril also disrespects him at the same time, which makes the Fool's statements more effective. She tells him that he is not making good use of his wisdom, which makes the carnival more powerful. Later in the play, Lear says that, "Does any here know me? This is not Lear" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 134), and the Fool in response says that, "Lear's shadow" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 134). This is exactly opposite to the Lear's real position as a king. What exactly the Fool is trying to do is to create a dialogic discourse through which he shows that even kings can make stupid decisions, and they can be more foolish than clowns. He also does not mind his words and expresses himself freely accompanied by telling the truth, in this way the hierarchical position of the King and the Fool is actually reversed.

Lear's two daughters deprive him from his throne that leads to his temporary madness. But this loss is not done simply; Shakespeare tries his best to dramatize this loss, which creates a carnivalesque discourse that undermines the king's hierarchy, who once claimed full authority over his land, people, court, and of course his family. First, he is being disrespected by Goneril; she orders her servant Oswald to behave with him rudely and do not prepare the dinner for him on time. Although King Lear had given away his authorities, he still has held his title and

perhaps military power. She mistreats the King's Fool and tries to decrease the number of his knights. And before the King leaves her castle she tells him "You strike my people, and your disordered rabble/Make servants of their betters" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 135). Regan shows the same behavior of her sister and even supports her sister's behavior. But this act is done in an ironic way, which increases the power of carnival. Both sisters confront their father while he still has his very title as the king. When King Lear enters her castle, she says, "I am glad to see your highness" 9 (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 166), while she actually had mistreated the king's messenger (Kent) and decides to return King Lear back to Goneril that leads to his madness. This use of the word "your highness" is ironic in the way that he is still the king but this disrespect gives an air of carnival to the discourse.

This breaking down of power does not end to the king only. This carnivalesque discourse also happens to the queens in which both of them lose their hierarchical power. Such fallings also happen to courtiers which symbolize the unfinalizable condition of dialogue, which is expressed by Bakhtin in his 1986 *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* as he says:

There is neither a first nor last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and reinvigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival (p. 170).

Throughout the dialogue, different voices clash with each other and no voice could be finalized, in this way the hierarchies of power are broken. To put full trust into authorities leads to disasters, like Edmund's disloyalty that causes the war between Britain and France. Edmund fakes an attack by Edgar to persuade his father that he is a traitor shows the shaky, unreliable and temporary position of those who serve in the court of power. Regan tells Gloucester that Edmund betrayed him, which shows the disastrous result of only relying on monologue. When Goneril betrays her husband by choosing Edmund, it also tries to degrade the hierarchies of authorities by showing these inferior acts of courtiers. The carnival takes place as Albany denounces her as his wife, and because she is the queen, her hierarchy is broken down. On the other hand, Goneril tries to steal Edmund's, love which also shows the low position of the other queen. Later on Albany finds out about his wife has been cheating on him, and both sisters die while Goneril commits suicide.

As a contribution to all these dialogism and carnivals, we can notice the fact in the play that it can be a disaster when characters try to establish a monologic discourse. They try to escape and destroy the dialogue such as king's harsh reactions toward Cordelia at the beginning of the play. According to Bakhtin:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme pure form)

another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change anything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and represented persons (1984, pp. 292-293).

When they actually want to suppress or delete the other voices it leads to a disastrous discourse. All these disastrous happenings actually try to weaken the hierarchy of the king and queens as the dominant speaking voices. Probably what a Bakhtinian approach wants from us in this play is to establish a dialogic situation.

The king tries to create a monologue and does not listen to Kent's advice, finally his position is collapsed as a disastrous consequence of a monologic imagination. Cordelia who has once been disgraced by the king becomes the commanding force of the French army. Once she did not have any voice and her father was the most dominant voice but now it is vice versa and she is more powerful than her father. Kent, who has been disgraced by king once, is now a powerful person next to Cordelia, but again they are defeated in the battle. This constant change of the dominant voices also depicts the unfixed position of the king and queens that refers to the idea of unfinalizability.

## CONCLUSION

The study tried to show the inevitability of heteroglossia in a world of dialogism, where there are challenges of different conflicting *selves*, as Hiebert (2003):

And the enactment of possession in the carnival, then, is a reversal of roles between the self and the social forces that possess it. Not independent of possession, however, for though altered, the relationship persists. And it is not an exorcism that occurs with the carnival enacting of possession. (p. 119)

Bakhtin does not wish to bring down somebody from power in order to replace it with another one for good. As humans cannot be fully known is the matter of unfinalizability, the position of the hierarchies in carnival is also temporary. A dialogue takes place as a result of the impossibility of fixation of people's thinking and behavior. The repetitious falls from the thrones and coming back to power actually tends to degrade the hierarchies of the kings and queens, which is the indicative of the unstable position of these characters that create a carnivalesque narrative discourse throughout the whole play. This carnivalism is actually done in an ironic and intensified manner to make the effects of breaking down the hierarchies even more powerful.

As the contribution to this analysis, what leads to characters' fall is their denouncement of dialogue. They want to suppress the other voices and kill the dialogue which in this way they actually try to establish a monologic discourse which leads to the disastrous repercussions. It is obviously expressed by Shakespeare that disaster happens when characters refuse to listen to the



different voices or when they try to exclude the other voices. This monologic discourse ends to disastrous results that actually destroy the hierarchy of the one or the ones who had actually tried to impose his/her or their power over the other characters.

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