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## Carnivalising the Cinema:

*Exploring Select Films by Lijo Jose Pellisserry*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to place the films by award winning Malayalam director Lijo Jose Pellissery within the framework of the carnivalesque mode put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin. The films selected for analysis are: *Amen* (2013), *Double Barrel* (2015), *Angamaly Diaries* (2017), *Ee.Ma.Yau* (2018) and *Jallikkattu* (2019), written by P.S.Rafeeqe, Lijo Jose Pellissery, Chemban Vinod Jose, P. F. Mathews and S. Hareesh respectively. Despite being obviously satiric, the films focus on the lives of the downtrodden and make use of a Christian landscape. The spatial arrangement of the scenes, frequent subversion of the clergy, linguistic nuances such as profanity and blasphemy, dualities, parody, violence such as animal slaughter and emphasis on physiological activities are vital to Pellissery's cinematic world. As everything is defamiliarized, logic and rationality vanishes and people are driven by their primordial instincts.

**Index Terms** – Carnivalisation, Public Space, Eccentricity, Parody, Humour

### Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and literary critic. He developed his concepts regarding carnivalization of literature specifically with regard to the notion of dialogue: "A person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 293). In relation to dialogue, Bakhtin made a detailed study of the literary works by Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929). Bakhtin also wrote *Rabelais and His World* (1965) focusing on French writer Francois Rabelais. These two books served as sources for Bakhtin's elaboration on carnivalization. In her 1991 essay entitled "Carnivalization and the Wholeness of Culture," E. Yu. Savinova notes that Bakhtin's research into the writings of Rabelais "resulted in the discovery of a completely new layer of culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which, in turn, altered the entire picture of the development of human culture" (qtd. in Emerson 30).

Until the second half of the seventeenth century, people were direct participants in carnivalistic acts. "They still lived in carnival, that is, carnival was one of the forms of life itself ... The source of carnivalization was carnival itself" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 171). From the second half of the seventeenth century on, carnival ceases to be a direct source of carnivalization, "ceding its place to the influence of already carnivalized literature; in this way carnivalization becomes a purely literary tradition" (171). One could trace the influences of carnival and the effects of the "carnivalized literature of the Renaissance" primarily that of Rabelais and Cervantes on Georges Sorel and Paul Scarron (171).

Bakhtin uses the term carnivalization to describe how carnival had the shaping effect on literary genres. "The earliest carnivalized literary forms are the Socratic dialogue and the Mennippean satire" (Selden 41). Carnival is deeply rooted "in the primordial order and primordial thinking of man" and "is one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 122). Even though the carnival is not a literary phenomenon, Bakhtin shows how authors perform a carnivalization of literature.

In simple terms, the carnival distorts all divisions that exist in a society. "The carnival is the ultimate other. It is what escapes classification, theorization and control" (Nayar 23). It is characterized by a blurring of the boundaries between people. "All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people" erasing the hierarchical barriers between them (Bakhtin, *Problems* 34). This forms the basis of his exploration of this idea.

Through its emphasis on "laughter" as a tool, carnivalisation leads to a subversion of power. "The laughter is not sanctioned by the government or the institution. It resists such control, and is therefore politically subversive" (Nayar 23). Nayar also observes

that carnival is a useful mode of discussing popular or mass culture because Bakhtin is essentially speaking of the need to subvert and interrogate established or institutional authority.

### Analysis of the Films

Bakhtin points out that the public space is the “the main arena for carnival acts” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 170). This public space includes a “carnival square” where majority of the action occurs during a carnival. There are also “other places of action” such “streets, taverns, roads, bathhouses, decks of ships . . .” (170). In his films Pellissery makes use of public spaces such as the church in *Amen* or the roads during the procession in *Angamaly Diaries*. In *Angamaly Diaries*, the action unveils in a market, a hotel, a pub and toddy shops. The protagonist comments that “All the fights in the area start at the local toddy shop and often get resolved at the same place” (46:23). Much of the action in *Amen* is also set at a local toddy shop, a place where all differences are set aside and everyone is treated as an equal. *Double Barrel* is set in hotels, inns and there is an open fight scene in the climax at a place called Cross hill. *Jallikkattu* is shot mostly outdoors – at roads, rubber plantations and forest. *Ee.Ma.Yau* is about a funeral at the protagonist’s house attended by many people. Pellissery’s choice of public arena serves as the primary foundation upon which he develops his “carnival.” As Bakhtin notes: “for by its very idea carnival belongs to the whole people, it is universal, everyone must participate in its familiar contact” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 129).

By utilizing public space as the pivot upon his action develops, Pellissery also blurs the distinction between public and private realms. According to Bakhtin, this mingling of public and private spaces is “the symbol of communal performance” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 170). In *Amen*, the private life of Solomon and Shoshanah becomes a public affair. The film also focuses on the competition between various music bands and the result of the competition would affect the lives of many. In *Jallikkattu*, an entire village unifies to hunt down the buffalo that wreaks havoc in the village, threatening the safety of human life. In *Double Barrel*, many people are in pursuit of Laila and Majnu – two precious stones that were sought by many such as prehistoric men, the Egyptians, Moses, and even Hitler. There is a song parodying a carnival set in a beach. Throughout the film, the lives of the characters cross over each other and in the end a fight erupts between different gangs belonging to Billy, Blacky and *Podiyadees* who are involved in the pursuit. A similar method is also employed in *Angamaly Diaries* when the *Palliyangadi* team fights others during a Church procession. *Ee.Ma.Yau* traces the transformation of the protagonist Eeshi crumbling under the weight of injustice forced upon him by various members of the society such as the Vicar Fr. Zacharia, the gravedigger, and the coffin seller. “Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 122). In the films, as private affairs attain attention of the public, many lives are intertwined with each other making them indistinguishable. The characters become both the spectators and participants.

As the movies progress, the viewers are shown a chaotic world where there is no law and order or regulations. *Double Barrel* and *Angamaly Diaries* ends in a fight between the different gangs. *Ee.Ma.Yau*’s ending shows a frantic Eeshi digging in the rain in order to bury his father who was refused a proper burial. *Amen* portrays a village that is under oppression by the autocratic Parish Priest Fr. Abraham Ottaplakan, and his sexton Kochousep who adds fuel to the fire. When he decides to challenge Solomon to a music performance, Shevaliyar Pothachan in *Amen* keeps eating glass as he bleeds from the mouth. Therutha responds by breaking a bottle on her head. During the performance, Pothachan whips himself echoing the pain underwent by Christ. The entire premise of *Jallikkattu* is chaotic, and it shows how the men from an entire village who are unable to cope with the confusion, lose their sanity and humanity altogether. “Eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits – in concretely sensuous form – the latent sided of human nature to reveal and express themselves” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123). Pellissery’s cinematic world is not an orderly, sane or humane world. It is “life turned inside out” or “the reverse side of the world.” In short, Pellissery’s cinematic canvas portrays an idiosyncratic set of people belonging to a chaotic world.

During a carnival, there is a new interrelationship between individuals. “The behaviour, gesture and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123). In the films, there is a blurring of the binaries such as the rich - the poor, the pious - the sinner and the good - the evil. The clergymen in Pellissery’s cinematic world are far from being pious, kind or humane. In *Amen*, Fr. Ottaplakan dominates the screen with his sinister presence. He is determined to ruin the private life and the career of the protagonist Solomon, making himself the antagonist. He plans to demolish a perfectly intact ancient church in the name of restoration. When questioned by Fr. Vincent Vattolli, he declares “In Kumaronkary, Fr. Abraham Ottaplakan is the ultimate authority” (2:00:45). Similarly in *Ee.Ma.Yau* Fr. Zacharia Parappurathu is an aspiring detective figure, devoid of any compassion. He investigates Vavachan Mesthiri’s death and assumes it to be an unnatural death. In the ensuing process, he declines Vavachan’s right to be buried in the cemetery. In, *Jallikkattu* the parish priest is infuriated as the buffalo runs amok destroying many properties including the crop field that belongs to the church. He asks the police officer “Is there any way to shoot it down?” (1:15:06). In the films, everyone is in pursuit of their selfish aspirations and is devoid of compassion, essentially becoming a part of the seemingly chaotic world.

The fourth carnivalistic category is profanation. He explains it as “carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringing down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of earth and the body, the carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123). Apart from the portrayal of clergymen, Pellissery also brings in a humorous twist as to how he presents Christ. In both *Amen* and *Angamaly Diaries*, the protagonists who are dressed as Christ for a drama performance ends up in a fight. In *Angamaly Diaries*, the one who is dressed up as Lord Krishna asks the Christ to “give him a puff” of the cigarette he is smoking (9:44). In *Double Barrel*, as imagined by Pancho and Vincy, Christ along with his two angels, poses for a selfie with them. Vincent Pepe, the protagonist of *Angamaly Diaries*, says “My name Pepe refers to Joseph, father of Christ. I was also an altar boy and had a Christian upbringing” (14:10). Yet he ended up doing illicit activities and becomes the prime culprit of a murder case. Also, Pellissery personifies angels in *Amen* and *Ee.Ma.Yau*. In *Amen*, Solomon meets his dead father who is accompanied by two angels. In *Ee.Ma.Yau* two angels in human form are seen playing chess and serve as choral characters as they make comments on the actions of the living.

Pellissery consciously undermines all forms of etiquettes and manners associated with human beings irrespective of their social rank or gender. While analyzing Rabelais in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin elaborates on what he calls grotesque realism: "It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (19). He argues that the spirit of the carnival is inherently anti-elitist because "much of our basic physiology – located in what Bakhtin calls the "lower bodily stratum" – is identical, involuntary, and non-negotiable" (Emerson 32). Bodily activities such as copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, painful representation of death, eating, drinking, or defecation are considered to be "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 20). Scatological humour is employed a lot in *Amen* with reference to Chachappan and Paily. Therutha, Paily's mother, appearing saint-like with a halo on her head, asks others not to make fun of his flatulence. Louis Pappan who is disappointed with the performance of his music band remarks that "Rather than training the band, it is better to pass gas under water, at least a few bubbles will come" (1:30:15).

Eating is a basic physiological activity and food is a major discourse in Pellissery's films. Often confined to the domestic space, women are assigned the traditional role of cooking and serving for the men in the family. In *Ee.Ma.Yau*, a portion of the film consists of the preparation of a duck curry by Eeshi's wife Sabeth. In *Jallikattu*, Antony forces a kiss on Kaalan Varkey's sister Sophie, and instead of being offended she tells him to "bring the ribs of buffalo so that she can cook it with tapioca" (1:27:18). *Angamaly Diaries* and *Jallikattu* normalises animal slaughter and graphically depicts the violence against animals. The disclaimer "No animals were harmed in the making of the movie" seems ironic since the films depict pork and beef business in Kerala. *Angamaly Diaries* shows local food items such as beef in mangocurry, beef as a side dish to gheeroast, pork cooked with Chinese potato, green peas in omelette and so on. There are references in the films such as an *Angalmaikaaraan* would never eat vegetables alone and that the pork from Angamaly is "world famous" (41:10). Even the characters are named Pork Varkey (who sells pork) and Kaadan Benny (who eats all kinds of meat, including a python). The fight that becomes a turning point in the lives of the characters is set at a toddy shop where they fight over the last plate of rabbit curry. The opening song that encapsulates an overview of the geography of Angamaly also focuses on food. In the film, Pellissery bring in food to the forefront and seems to suggest that it is a major part in the life of a person residing in Angamaly.

Bakhtin also elaborates on parody. Parody is not "a naked rejection of the parodied object. Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 127). *Double Barrel* serves as a parody/spoof of gangster movies. The title of the film is a reference to the double barrel gun, or any gun that is integral to the plot of gangster movies. However, in the film the fights are overdramatized and humourous. During the opening credits there are two references to the characters from *Amen* – Chachappan and Therutha. Chachapan observes that the film is "set in a time before scientists have discovered logic" (0:57). Therutha says that "In the film the Russians, Utopians, Germans and Italians speak Malayalam" (1:02). Some of the characters are given generic names like Don, Gabbar, Japan Uncle, Blackie, Boss, He, She, Silent, Kid, Husband, Wife and so on. Dons, motorbikes, sunglasses, Mexican standoffs, smoking, costumes – which are all a necessary formula of gangster movies – are given a humorous tinge in *Double Barrel*. Moreover there is a deliberate attempt from the part of the characters to sound very dramatic as they deliver their speeches.

For Bakhtin, parody serves a higher purpose in carnivalized literature. With reference to doubling, he observes that the leading heroes of Dostoevsky such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Stavrogin in *Demons* (1873) and Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) have "several doubles who parody [them] in various ways" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 129). In *Amen* Kochousep, Philipose and Mathayichan mirrors the evil Fr. Ottaplakan. But Fr. Vincent Vattolli serves as a foil to Fr. Ottaplakan. Vattolli does not follow the conducts that are suited for a Jesuit Priest. Vattolli does not wear his religious robe, he is friendly with women, and interestingly performs a dance to the tunes of a song. It is later suggested that Vattolli is actually Saint George disguised as a human being who came to solve all the problems of Kumarankary. Vattolli is literally a *deus ex machina* employed by Pellissery. Also, Solomon and Shoshanna symbolize the dichotomy between the rich and the poor.

In *Double Barrel* Pellissery employs doubles and dualities, but the doubles have no greater purpose except to add to the humour. "Very characteristic for carnival thinking is paired images, chooses for their contrast (high/low, fat/thin etc.) or for their similarity (doubles/twins)" (Bakhtin 126). The entire premise of the story is about the hunt for two precious jewels called Laila and Majnu. Laila that is "yellow like the colour of fire" and Majnu which is "red like blood" should be together and only then can they be of any value (18:08). The film parodies the classic love story between Laila and Majnu. Similar to Laila and Majnu, everyone in *Double Barrel* appears in duos Pancho-Vincy, Majnu-Diesel, Boss-Laila, He-She, Don-Gabbar, Silent-Kid, Tarkov-Lady Tarkov and World-Chaplie. Even the title of the film *Double Barrel* is self-explanatory.

In *Amen*, the unnamed goons that Philipose hires parodies the evil duo in "Mayavi," a comic in the children's weekly Malayalam comic magazine *Balarama*. In *Jallikattu*, Antony and Kuttachan represents savagery versus civilization. *Ee.Ma.Yau* is set amidst the death of Vavachan Mesthiri and portrays the ordeals related to the funeral. Eeshi believes that his father deserves a funeral that is given to Bishops and decides to lay his father in an expensive coffin, showing his aspiration to climb up the ladders of social status. However, Vavachan is denied a grave because the gravedigger was buried at the grave intended for him. In the end, Vavachan's death is juxtaposed with the image of a dead dog. The ending of the film extends the theme of death as a boat comes to take the dead to the other world. *Ee.Ma.Yau* contrasts life and death as well as the plights of the poor to achieve social mobility.

For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is not sinister, but offers "general spiritual freedom" (Emerson 54). It facilitates "the removal of pain" which can be understood both as "physical discomfort and mental anxiety" (56). As Emerson notes, "the virtues that Bakhtin bestows on carnival laughter" are "fearlessness, flexibility, survival, ambivalence, mental and psychological relief" (66). Discussing its ambivalent effects, Bakhtin observes:

Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher - toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders . . . Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. Such is the specific quality of ambivalent carnival laughter (Bakhtin, *Problems* 127).

Pellissery places humour at unlikely places bordering on black humour. In *Jallikattu*, when the buffalo accidentally enters the backyard of a house, an old man who is bedridden sees it through the window. He imagines it to be the arrival of *Yamaraja* - the Hindu deity of death and the underworld - who travels on a buffalo. In *Ee.Ma.Yau*, Eeshi is betrayed into buying a low quality coffin. When Vavachan's body is carried to the courtyard in the heavy rain, the basement of the coffin breaks and his dead body falls down, as people accuses him of buying something so useless. Similarly, in *Angamaly Diaries*, Paripp Marti and Kanakuna Marti break the limbs of a corpse that would not fit into a coffin and gets arrested for it. In *Double Barrel*, the dead body of Laila is kept in a fridge and Majnu is asked to dispose it. Majnu who had taken a drug, hallucinates and imagines Laila to be alive and began interacting with her. During the scenes in which Pancho and Vincy face death, Pellissery brings in something humourous and they narrowly escape death.

In his films, Pellissery often juxtaposes humour and death, generating laughter at a time when one should be contemplating seriously on the subject. "Laughter is a weapon, like fists and sticks. But unlike those latter two weapons, which can be wielded effectively in anger and in dread, laughter must be absolutely fearless" (Emerson 36). It could be said that the laughter Pellissery creates has a therapeutic effect, but it is "fearless" as the laughter is essential in bringing together "a shift of world orders." In the chaotic cinematic world that he creates, eccentricity and laughter takes the forefront while logic and rationality are subdued.

As Bakhtin explains the third category of the carnival sense which he calls *carnivalistic mesalliances*, he notes: "A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things" (Bakhtin 123). He continues, "Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (123). Everything that was once separate enters into contact and combinations. In the films, there is a unification the lofty and the low along with that the sacred and the profane. The purpose of the carnivalisation is to offer a new perspective. According to him, the carnival spirit offers the chance to "have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things." (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 105).

## Conclusion

In the films there occurs a deliberate defamiliarisation. The people who belong to the communities seem to share a collective mentality that is often chaotic and eccentric. As the films progress, the relatable characters, identifiable locations and realistic stories become estranged, and alien to the audience. The hostility they harbour for each other is the motivating force behind the action of the characters. The "other" is always an absent presence in the film. From the common people of unnamed rural village in *Jallikattu*, Kumaronkory in *Amen* and Chellanam in *Ee.Ma.Yau*, to the gangs in Goa in *Double Barrel* and Angamaly in *Angamaly Diaries*, Pellissery's characters operate on a logic that is at discord with the rational, civilized and conventional viewers. The characters map out a place for themselves.

Bakhtin notes that "the primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king" (35). He adds that in European carnivals, they mock priests, bishops or popes who were chosen in place of a king. With the exception of *Angamaly Diaries* and *Double Barrel*, priests are central characters in the films. The Priests in Pellissery's films take up the roles of decrowned kings. Once hailed as great leaders, the priests gradually reveal their true nature. They are not pious or compassionate, instead they are autocratic and antagonistic.

Bakhtin traces the roots of carnival spirit to the primordial order and primordial thinking of man: "During the Renaissance, one could say that the primordial elements of carnival swept away many barriers and invaded many realms of official life and worldview" (133). Pellissery delves into the raw, primordial id impulses of mankind in his films. The sadomasochistic Pothachan in *Amen* and the distraught Eeshi in *Ee.Ma.Yau* are two examples. When denied an honourable burial, Eeshi decides to bury his dead father by himself at their home and attacks everyone as they try to calm him. Eeshi's desperation resembles the primordial impulses of men in *Jallikattu*. The entire village unifies in an attempt to capture the buffalo, resembling "a bullfight that clearly expressed carnivalistic character" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 129). Even after Antony had brutally killed the animal, people gather on top of it forming a human pyramid. The film concludes as it shows prehistoric men fighting over a dead animal. Pellissery seems to suggest that despite all the scientific and social advancements, humankind has not achieved any progress and that deep down they are guided by their bestial instincts. At the end credits he quotes *The Book of Revelation*: "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and the mighty, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small" (qtd. in *Jallikattu*). Pellissery sounds apocalyptic as he paints a bleak picture in *Jallikattu*, drawing parallels between primordial man and present day man on the basis of mob violence.

As Bakhtin observes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that in non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people including age (33).

This observation clearly sums up the cinematic world of Pellissery – law and order is suspended; etiquettes, manners and piety are forgotten; chaos prevail, as people metaphorically becomes one erasing all the socio-hierarchical barriers, driven by a primordial instinct.

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