JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

TRADITIONAL PARADIGMS IN *ARDHANAREESWARAN*: A CARNIVALESQUE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Carnival is a type of ceremonial spectacle that allows for the suspension of conventional beliefs and social hierarchies; one witnesses kings turning into peasants and vice versa. This carnivalesque reading of *Ardhanareeswaran* foregrounds the theory of carnivalesque and its application in the book, which sheds light on how conventional ideas like myths, rituals, the decline in fertility and inherited traits, caste systems, sexuality, and gender roles complicate otherwise straightforward human existence. The breaking down of the caste system and the customs of the locale for the mere sake of the rituals associated with the celebration of a festival becomes the root of explaining the employment of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in the book.

***Index terms*: Carnivalesque, Subversion, Festival, Superstition, Ritual**

INTRODUCTION

The carnivalesque is a notion described by the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, which subverts and challenges authority, traditions and rules. It breaks down the boundaries of class, caste and position. Most importantly, it celebrates the forbidden things during which the normal rules are defied with the most pleasure. It is mostly like a huge party, a carnival which goes against the social rules and norms with great pleasure and gratification. Carnivalesque is a literary and cultural mode that uses the carnival spirit to question and disrupt social conventions in texts, performances, and larger cultural contexts, whereas carnival is a real-world event. Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque allows marginalised voices to question prevailing ideas through inversion and laughter by bringing a sense of grotesque humour and chaotic freedom into structured narratives.

This article analyses the carnivalesque elements of *Ardhanareeswaran* to identify how Perumal Murugan bridges the cultural, social and economic gap in the plot through the carnival. Carnivalesque initially appeared as 'carnival' in Mikhail Bakhtin's work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and then was developed in his work *Rabelais and His World*. He says,

> Carnival itself is not, of course, a literary phenomenon. It is 'syncretic pageantry' of a ritualistic sort. As a form, it is very complex and varied and nuances depending upon the epoch, the people, and the individual festivity. Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms- from large and complex mass actions to individual carnivalistic gestures. (Bakhtin 122)

Madhorubagan, which Dr. Appu Jacob John translated into Malayalam as *Ardhanareeswaran*, is Perumal Murugan's most well-known and influential book. The story depicts the traditions that were once practiced in Tamil Nadu. The narrative follows the lives of an agricultural couple in 'Tiruchengode'. Kaliyannan, often known as Kali, is a natural farmer, and his devoted and caring wife, Ponna, is the protagonist of the story. The absence of a kid is the sole problem in their relationship. The pair engages in many acts of penance and prays to numerous deities, yet all remain ineffective. Everyone in society made fun of them since they were a childless couple.

According to the patriarchal society members in the book, particularly the females, impotence is believed to be brought on by the curses of gods and goddesses. The elders, therefore, encourage them to perform several rites. Murugan discusses the 'Tiruchengode temple' in this section of the narrative. There are numerous idols atop the hill, and each one is believed to have the ability to grant a particular blessing. One of these is the 'Ardhanareeswarar', a Shiva statue who has donated his left side to his spouse Parvathi. According to legend, childless women would arrive alone at this location, which would be bustling with festival celebrations, on a particular evening of the yearly chariot festival at the temple of 'Ardhanareeswarar'. Each woman is free to mate with a man who is not related to her, who is seen as a manifestation of God to get pregnant.

This work is related to the mediaeval notion of a carnival hosted by the cathedral's sub-deacons. People were temporarily exempted from their typical conduct requirements during a funfair. The only level of celebration which is prohibited from a carnival is violence. An example of Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque is *Ardhanareeswaran*. The book contains some of the four types of carnivalistic senses that Bakhtin uses. Bakhtin put forward four hallmarks of the carnival sense of the world they are: familiar and free interaction between people, eccentricity, carnivalistic misalliance and profanation. According to Bakhtin, "the primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent de-crowning of the carnival king." (124). A carnival is characterised by beautiful decorations and people dressed up enjoying and partying. Everyone enjoys life irrespective of which social circle he comes from and shows how to celebrate life, and it is what Mikhail Bakhtin talks about in the theory of carnivalesque.

Murugan depicts a civilisation that is deeply rooted in religion in the first section of the novel. The 'Gounder' community is briefly introduced in the opening pages of the novel as a community of farmers living in the inner part of Tamilnadu. For the 'Gounder' community, the absence of male successors is considered a terrible curse. If a 'Gounder' male does not have a son to reap the rewards of his labour, his adult life is considered pointless. The community ruthlessly stigmatises childlessness. As a result, the absence of children brings about serious issues in the lives of Kali and Ponna. She is constrained by patriarchal rules just like any other female. Her baroness is constantly being questioned by the patriarchy. The neighbourhood also covertly prevents Ponna from taking part in the harvesting and sowing ceremony out of concern that she would be a curse for the coming harvest. She is also instructed to carry out several religious ceremonies to defeat the baroness.

Murugan presents this community as being very superstitious. They are deaf to the reality. They are incredibly diligent workers who are also highly religious. Their religious practices are supported by various dogmas, ceremonies, stories, superstitions, and myths. They carry out a variety of rituals, from Pongal to sacrifice, in front of Gods and Goddesses as part of these social dogmas. Here, Ponna, Kali's wife, is portrayed as a typical country beauty who complies with all the patriarchal norms and odd traditions. Once her seeming barren status is known to the public, events that involve Kali and Ponna serve as an example of this awful situation.

Murugan questions the superstitions and bizarre practices through the character Nallupayyan, Kali's uncle and the author's spokesperson, who is the revolutionary figure in the novel. He is seen as an outlaw by the villagers because he does not accept things at face value and opposes their methods, which place a higher emphasis on tradition than on humanity and existence. He has a contemporary outlook on life, which gives him the courage to challenge the pointless prejudices of the community. Murugan has created a social environment that is undoubtedly still in use. The events as a whole in the work demonstrate how numerous myths and traditional practices, by which diverse ideologies persist in this world, allowed simple and innocent human life and existence to become confused with complex and nebulous beliefs.

The author jumps right into the Chariot Festival at Karattur Hill Temple in the second section of the novel. Other titles for the deity include 'Maadhorubagan', 'Ardhanareeswaran', 'Mother God' and 'One Part Woman'. The Lord is depicted as a composite figure. The Lord is presented to have given his consort half of himself. 'Eeswaran' is the right of the composite, and 'Ambal' is the left. For the townspeople, the 'Maadhorubagan' temple's 'Chariot Festival' is a magnificent celebration which lasts eighteen days long. According to their bizarre tradition, any married lady without children is permitted to couple with a male stranger who roams around the temple on the last night of the festival, and the newborn would be known as 'Saamikuzhanthai' or 'Daivam thantha pillai'. The sacred is turned into mockery when God is portrayed as a human. They ask the Almighty to spare them pain and to grant them blessings like good health, a place to live, a family, and children. But in this case, God solely blesses married women who were unable to conceive for unknown reasons, and people in the society worship them. This is an outright subversion of tradition or a rejection of faith in people as a result of various superstitions being the characteristic of carnivalesque.

The later section of the book is also dominated by carnivalesque features. Ponna and her parents visit the temple to participate in the ceremony necessary to have a child without Kali's consent. For the celebration on that particular night, all the regulations are eased and are conducted in darkness. Ponna is pressured by her relatives to participate in the rituals. In the heat of the moment, Ponna realises that she is exempt from patriarchal conventions and suddenly has the urge to run through the crowd and laugh uncontrollably, with nothing stopping her, unlike before and feels free to act however she pleases. She wants to take advantage of the opportunity and move towards an unknown person. Hinduism advocates for physical and sexual monogamy within the framework of marriage, and that type of family is considered perfect. But in this case, the opposite of monogamy takes place when Ponna does the ceremony with a stranger rather than her husband. In every way, she utterly disregards her husband. Although it only occurs during the festival, society accepts bizarre or inappropriate behaviour without question. In this case, society appears to be in a position where it values sensory and sexual pleasures more rather than its traditions and practices, which proves to be a characteristic of Carnivalesque.

The mention of the theatrical production leads us to the final aspect of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, which is profanity. Carnivals glorify blasphemy and obscenity and blur the razor-thin line between the sacred and the profane. A clown who frequently interrupts the play's announcer as he explains the play's theme and setting finds opportunities for puns and jokes in every syllable. His puns walk the line between sanctity and blasphemy, bringing gods down to the level of common people while elevating common people to that of divinity.

The festival is often interpreted in a straightforward and seemingly innocent way as a Bakhtin-inspired carnival, emphasising joy, communal participation, and the temporary suspension of societal norms. The story frequently displays the first quality of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which is familiar and free interaction between people, regardless of caste and class distinctions, especially in the chariot festival at the 'Madhorubagan' temple. A man belonging to the higher caste would not typically ride in the same cart as a low-caste man like Maran, who does farm work for 'Peryasami' in 'Veliyur'. Before his marriage, Kali recalls going to the festival with Muthu and witnessing Muthu lose his virginity to a girl from a lower caste, which is unusual. Ponna could not have

imagined viewing a play full of puns and double meanings with a group of strangers under regular conditions. However, in the festival, she is pictured watching the play while seated near a group of strangers, both young and old.

The fundamental idea of carnivalesque breaks down the boundaries of class, caste and position. Caste membership is determined at birth. Every caste has its traditions and culture. People from lower castes are not allowed to interact with those belonging to higher castes. On the other hand, people from higher castes shouldn't interact with those from lower castes. If they come into contact, they are considered impure. To return to their former purity, society forces them to carry out specific rituals.

Ardhanareeswaran demonstrates the state of society today, where the caste system is still being practised. Everything in India, especially in rural regions, revolves around the concept of caste. Similar points have been made by Dwarakanath Gupta in his book *Socio-Cultural History of an Indian Caste.* Gupta discovers that caste institutions have a greater impact in rural areas. Gupta draws attention to the fact that caste and social class predominate in the bulk of government institutions, including district councils, state cabinets, and state administrations. In the eyes of strangers, India is an independent country devoid of religion, but its citizens actively support caste inequality.

The couple in *Ardhanareeswarn* is willing to sacrifice anything for a kid. However, they are not prepared to adopt a child from a different caste group. Ponna once told Kali, "If it came to adopting a child, she would prefer one from the same caste" (Murugan 229). Kali recalled what she said. Due to his fear of Ponna's involvement with an untouchable, Kali forbids her from taking part in the eighteenth-day ceremony at Karattur. The couple struggles with their desire for a child, their unwavering love for one another, and their loathing of the outcast populations throughout the entire book. Finally, the book shows how even if they have a child, they cannot accept them as their own. The gift from the Goddess Pavatha offers a pitiful conclusion.

The rank of persons is no longer acknowledged at the carnival. Because everyone was treated equally, the full human experience could be lived. Here, the religion Kali, Ponna, and other elders believe in doesn't consider the caste and rank of people. Ponna, a woman from a high-caste family, becomes ready to have sex with a stranger. But all the elders who supported Ponna were aware of the fact that most of the men there belonged to the low caste. But still, it didn't draw them back from the decision. Ponna was stubborn to do the ritual because she faced humiliation even after doing so many rituals and sacrifices to have a child.

Eccentric behaviour, one of the key characteristics of carnival theory, is visible in the behaviour of Ponna. In eccentric behaviour, the characters engage in behaviour that is frowned upon by society. When the character indulges in actions that are not socially acceptable, she acts eccentrically. Perumal Murugan wrote this novel in a non-linear narration format, which is also a feature of carnival works. Carnival works follow a non-chronological narration. Here, the writer intertwines the past and present life of the protagonists. The story starts from their present conditions, and it also goes to the past through the rewinding of Kali. It indicates that the story's events are scattered throughout and that it will present them in a style that prevents the reader from taking notes on them in a specific order. Stupid beliefs are considered sacred throughout the work. Thus, the novel becomes an example of a carnival which subverts the harmony of a society.

Carnival is expressive as opposed to practical, as it involves interpersonal connection, the expression of underlying human traits, and an uncommon rejection of traditional roles. It mixes various, generally mutually exclusive groups and classifications. Through his works, Perumal Murugan analyses social issues like gender discrimination, caste prejudice and cultural practices. Murugan makes an effort to illustrate social and cultural unfairness in society. Murugan doesn't simply focus on today's social challenges he also considers how social injustice affects society as a whole. His characters experience many forms of social discrimination as well as internal conflicts. In this novel, he explores both the beauty and rich culture of Tamil Nadu and its dark side of superstitions and unjust traditions. This emerges as the main cause of the couple's sorrow. It depicts the anguish and pain that the couple in the novel experiences.

Carnival is an idealistic vision of human liberation through unrestrained thought and creative expression. The mediaeval carnival played a crucial role in the life of common people. The official world and the shadowy world were two separate realities for these people. The first realm was governed by the church and the feudal system, while the second was marked by comedy, parody, songs, and the overturning of the existing order. For him, clown, the fool, and comic rites subvert the official sphere governed by the church and the state. Likewise, in this novel also, there are two worlds. The one in which conventional rules are followed, where the woman lives in chastity and is respected by everyone and the other in which all the rules are broken down for temporary relaxation.

CONCLUSION

The novel depicts a culture that is centred on religious belief and traditional rituals, skillfully conveying both the cultural characteristics and ramifications of such beliefs. The main pair gradually comes under such tremendous strain from a community that conducts all actions in the name of God and has a rigid structural identity to which every individual almost needs to cater that they eventually encounter an identity crisis and a sense of worthlessness. The narrative skillfully portrays the complexities of blind faith and illuminates the function of myth as both the root of and solution to the couple's difficulties.

The author, Perumal Murugan, seems to be alluding to the fact that the idea of a blessing or a curse is solely a societal construct and that Gods are rarely involved in such matters in *Ardhnareeswarn*. The myth of this blessing and curse revolved around the 'Maadhorubagan' sitting on the hilltop of the temple at Tiruchengode. The rules are all turned around in this instance as society is at its most enjoyable state. Kali is in a state of panic after losing everything at this festival. Kali and Ponna are represented by Murugan as a representation of the many different people who have suffered through ritualised superstitious activities yet went unreported by society. Without harming the people, society is free to change its existing laws to advance. In our lives, superstitions often lead to issues. The transmission of superstitions through the generations has been greatly aided by illiteracy. The different

ways in which superstitions, norms and myths are misapplied by society and eventually result in the abolition of familial structures are bravely shown by Perumal Murugan. Ironically, this same culture allows for small-scale carnivalesque to offer a feeling of respite from these rigid rules and mores.

Through the carnival, Perumal Murugan also breaks down the caste system. In carnival, no one is higher than any other person; it treats every person equally. The caste system in India was first used to categorise the populace according to their occupations in the distant past. A hierarchy of castes and sub-castes was swiftly established as a result, and the so-called lower castes were subjected to despotic oppression by the so-called upper castes. A Carnivalesque reading of the work enables one to realise how it emphasises the idea that the composite form of Shiva and Parvati subverts conventional societal, religious, and gender standards. By combining opposites and inverting hierarchical binaries, this figure subverts established systems.

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