Bakhtinian Carnival and Folk Resistance to Hierarchical Power in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

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The paper will analyse the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer in terms of the theoretical approach to the carnivalesque in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin with regard to the ways in which the folkloric laughter, everyday language or speech, and visuality of the body are used to resist the hierarchical systems of power in the Middle Ages. Based on the respective stories like The Miller Tale, The Reeve Tale, and The Wife of Bath Tale, the research holds that Chaucer exploits the folk traditions and carnival aesthetics to disrupt feudal, clerical, and patriarchal authority. Instead of serving to strengthen the dominant ideology, the text establishes a dialogic literary space in which voices of the bottom challenge the official culture. The paper places Chaucer in a wider context of folk resistance and shows how carnival is not only a comic relief of a political nature but also a culturally explosive act that occasionally turns the social order upside down and challenges the power of the institutions.

Keywords: Carnivalesque, Folklore, Power, Chaucer, Popular Culture, resistance.

Introduction

One concept proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin has been called carnivalesque, which is a cultural and literary mode based on the medieval and Renaissance carnival practices where hierarchies in relations are then lowered, the power is ridiculed, and the general laughter is used instead of fear and religious reverence. In the carnivalesque environment, there are no clear lines between high and low, sacred and profane, ruler and ruled. Bakhtin points out that carnival is not the show viewed through a window but rather a social activity that is based on the popular culture, folk rituals and communal celebration. Laughter here is not just humorous but regenerative and subversive and has the authority of desacralizing the official ideologies and revealing the constructedness of authority.

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most important literary works in late medieval England not only due to its variety of narratives and the stylistic experiment, but also due to its sophisticated interaction with the social, cultural and power structures existing in that era. Written at the end of the fourteenth century, the work is a result of a time characterized by strict feudal hierarchies, the authority of the clergy and patriarchal values, but it is also an indication of the lively popular expression culture based on folklore, oral tradition, and community celebration. The brilliance of Chaucer is in his possibility to combine these seemingly conflicting cultural forces into one narrative structure and thus re-form *The Canterbury Tales* into a cultural arena of ideological negotiation.

The society of the Middle Ages was officially ordered by the strictly defined systems of power: the nobility was the bearer of political power, and the Church was the bearer of moral and intellectual life and the relations between the sexes were ordered by patriarchal codes. But under this official culture was another kind of parallel culture popular culture, which was manifested in fairs,

festivals, folk tales, fabliau and carnivals. This informal culture tended to be based on humour, parody, bodily imagery, and oral performance to challenge and temporarily reverse the existing hierarchies. Chaucer heavily relies on such folk tradition, especially in those stories told by lower and middle classes characters like the Miller, the Reeve, and the Wife of Bath. Their narratives lack grave moralizing, but presuppose laughter, sexuality, and experience as other types of knowledge.

Even the pilgrimage frame of *The Canterbury Tales*, has a very carnivalesque character. Knight, miller, clerk, merchant, wife, and ploughman are pilgrims of various classes who are placed in a unique social environment where the hierarchies that are traditionally practiced are temporarily put on hold. The fact that the Miller interrupts the Knight during his high romance is a very vivid illustration of carnival inversion. The Miller's demand to narrate his story first literally defies the aristocratic hierarchy and substitutes the courtly values with the fabliau full of folk humour and physical extravagance. These narrative breaks indicate that Chaucer is intentionally setting up confrontations between high and low cultures in order to undermine the precariousness of social authority.

The idea of carnival according to Bakhtin also throws more light on the practice of narration by Chaucer. Bakhtin maintains that carnival gives the lower body stratum the opportunity to subvert abstract authority by basing it on physicality. This is the principle that is re-played in the comic tales of Chaucer.

In The Miller's Tale, the female controlled and male dominated world of scholastic learning and patriarchy is mocked by the use of farce, sexual deceptions and corporeal punishment, whereas in The Reeve's Tale, social vengeance is accomplished not through legal and moral justice, but through folk tricks and physical offences. These are the stories that typify the concept of grotesque realism as proposed by Bakhtin wherein the body is made a location of cultural defiance and not the defiance of morality.

Folklore is important in maintenance of this carnivalesque resistance. Folklore is based on oral tradition and shared memory and provides another epistemology that places more emphasis on experience than doctrine and shared wisdom than institution. An example is the Tale of the Wife of Bath, which utilizes folk motifs of change, magic and power to challenge the dominance of men and misogynistic tendencies of the clergy. When Chaucer gives a female voice the narrative authority based on the experience of living and not learning theology, he contradicts the power of patriarchy in the very form of the narrative itself.

This paper presents the thesis that the use of carnivalesque folklore by Chaucer is not an accident but rather very political. *The Canterbury Tales* establishes a literary environment where dominant ideologies are challenged and marginalized voices are put temporarily in power, because of folk laughter, dialogic narration, and reversal of hierarchy. Although Chaucer does not seem to be a proponent of violent subversion of the social order of the Middle Ages, he exposes its

inconsistencies and susceptibility by letting the popular culture speak up against the authority.

This paper aims to show how folklore is a way of cultural resistance in *The Canterbury Tales* by analysing some of the stories through the concept of carnival, dialogism, and grotesque realism as proposed by Bakhtin. This introduction therefore places the study in the folklore studies, medieval literature, and power theory intersection, thus showing the persistence of Chaucer as a writer who made popular culture a subtle but powerful commentary on hierarchical power.

Review of Literature

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer has received a wide and varied scholarly attention, both in terms of formalist and philological criticism and other schools, such as historicist, feminist and cultural materialist. The current research approach places itself in the general critical tradition but particularly refers to the theoretical works concerning carnival, folklore, and power. The next review takes a survey of the major critical texts that guide the interpretation of Bakhtinian carnivalesque and folk resistance in Chaucer and their relevance and limitations. Rabelais and His World by Mikhail Bakhtin is still one of the sources of the discussion of the carnival and popular culture. Bakhtin theorizes the carnivalesque as a social activity based on medieval folk customs and which relies on laughter, parody and a temporary abandonment of hierarchical authority. Even though Bakhtin concentrates mainly on Rabelais, his theories have been broadly applied to the medieval English literature. His

focus on grotesque realism and the liberation of folk laughter offers the main theoretical basis in understanding the comic tales of Chaucer as the places of cultural resistance instead of entertainment.

Much of the early Chaucerian criticism, including that of Donald R. Howard in Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World, focuses on how much Chaucer is involved with the social reality of the fourteenth century England. Howard interprets *The Canterbury Tales* as the reflection of the medieval society, where all the characters represent various classes and social positions. Although Howard does not introduce the Bakhtinian terms directly, his work highlights the social plurality of the text and thus pre-empts the subsequent dialogic and carnivalesque approaches.

Social Chaucer by Paul Strohm is a breakthrough in the direction of historical readings of Chaucer. Strohm explains that the texts of Chaucer are influenced by the socio-tensions and contradictions of the politics and not by the unity. His commentary on the class struggle, city culture and social mobility offers a very important background to the study of folk resistance in *The Canterbury Tales*. The article by Strohm helps uphold the assumption that the interaction of Chaucer with popular culture reveals inconsistencies in the medieval power politics.

The article by Stephen H. Rigby, Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender present a materialistic approach to the description of social relations by Chaucer. Rigby highlights the ideological aspects of Chaucer stories, when it comes to the issues of

classes and gender. His analyses of fabliau bring out the theme of how the folk humour questions aristocratic and clerical concepts, further driving the point that carnivalesque humour could serve as a form of criticism.

Although Society and Culture in Early Modern France is not about Chaucer, the work by Natalie Zemon Davis is persuasive in the way that it examines the culture of the festival and the popular protest. Davis illustrates how ritualistic and carnivals enabled common people to make a symbolic resistance to authority. Her observations of inversion at festivals and the rituals of opposition are useful in putting the application of folk traditions by Chaucer in a wider European cultural context.

The Canterbury Tales, as critically edited and commented by Jill Mann, are valuable in terms of text and interpretation of comic narratives in Chaucer. Mann highlights the irony of the narratives told by Chaucer, and his complicated use of voice and point of view. Her focus on the role of various narrators in constructing meaning lends credence to a dialogic approach to reading the text, which views Bakhtin as focusing on plurality and heteroglossia.

Stephen Greenblatt in Learning to Curse discovers power, language, and subversion relationships in early literature. Although Greenblatt is mainly referring to the early modern era as his main scope of discussion, in his discussion of subversive discourse in dominant power frameworks, Greenblatt provides a theoretical framework through which we can read the carnivalesque acts of Chaucer as being controlled but significant challenges to authority.

Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* adds to the theoretic base of the study, describing the way the literature operates in the ideological frames. The discussion of ideology and culture by Eagleton assists in explaining how folk narratives in Chaucer may contribute to accepting the prevailing values and challenge them at the same time. His work supports the idea that literary works are arenas of ideological conflict instead of apolitical objects.

The Marxism and Literature by Raymond Williams can offer a fundamental guideline on how culture is viewed as a dynamic process that is influenced by dominant, residual, and emergent forces. The concept of residual culture by Williams is also especially applicable in the context of folklore, which continues to exist in the midst of a dominant ideology and sometimes opposes it. This point of view enhances the discussion of the application of folk traditions by Chaucer as a residual, but a resistant, cultural form.

Lastly, the reading of Chaucer by Carolyn Dinshaw is in the form of a gender reading of Chaucer, especially the topic of desire, the body, and power. Her commentary on sexual talk in *The Canterbury Tales* is a welcome addition to Bakhtinian ideas of the body and grotesque realism, particularly in knowing how carnivalesque sexuality is disruptive of patriarchal power.

Taken together, these critical articles show that *The Canterbury Tales* can be fruitfully read as a text that is highly interested in popular culture and power relations.

Although earlier research has placed a focus on such aspects as humour, conflict in classes, and plurality of narration, the current research is an extension of that understanding because it prefigures the carnivalesque proposed by Bakhtin to the current research as a single framework to discuss folklore as a form of resistance to dominant authority throughout the world depicted by Chaucer.

Research Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative, textual, and interpretative approach. It is primarily analysed by means of close reading on some of the tales chosen by *The Canterbury Tales*. Carnival, dialogism, grotesque realism, and folk laughter, as theoretical constructs by Bakhtin, are the main tools of analysis. The readings are put in context with the help of secondary sources on the medieval folklore, popular culture, and power relations. It is an interdisciplinary approach which involves literary criticism, cultural theory and historical insight.

Carnival and The Topside‑Down

Carnival inversion is one of the primary ideas of the author on the role of the popular culture in the conflict with the established structures of power. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, can be seen as a social state where normative orders are put on hold and turned upside down. The values and structures that determine the daily life such as rank, status, decorum, and institutional power are deprived of their binding power during carnival. Rather a world turned upside down is created, in which the low scolds the high, the

foolish mocks the wise, and the marginal on the fringe of society, is granted a freedom otherwise unavailable to them. The inversion is not aimed at the permanent abolishment of hierarchy but it reveals its artificial and changeable status.

Medieval society was very hierarchical, structured in the feudal system, clergy church, and patriarchal terms. There was a strict definition of social roles, and the law, religion and tradition strengthened obedience to authority. Carnival inversion served as a mass exhortation of this rigidity. Carnival gave common people a symbolic equality, which was in stark contrast to the inequality in real life through laughter, parody and ritualized disorder. Bakhtin stresses that this equality was not abstract and only theoretical: it was not something that the participants noticed but something they experienced.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer repeats this carnivalesque inversion by the way the story is told as well as in the way characters relate. The pilgrimage itself is a unifying element of persons of different social classes in one common environment where the traditional hierarchies are relaxed. Although the Knight is the loftiest social position among the pilgrims, his power is not absolute. The drunken insistence of the Miller telling his story right after the Knight is a direct breach of the societal norms. This scene is a carnival inversion because one of the characters who is linked to manual labour and unrefined language disrupts the aristocratic manners and takes control of the storytelling.

The inversion of this is additionally carried out in the stories. Patriarchal and learned power is mocked in The Miller Tale. The educated scholar Nicholas turns into a prankster instead of a teacher whereas John the carpenter, who uses his authority in marriage, is put down by a farce. The story substitutes seriousness with the humour of the body, and it focuses on sexuality, physicality and deception. These representations reverse the medieval hierarchical arrangement, according to which intellectual and moral authority was superior to the body and popular knowledge.

On the same note, The Reeve Tale employs the use of folk revenge to eliminate social hierarchy. The story of the Reeve, an administrative figure, is a story in which arrogant millers are not punished in terms of law or administrative means but as a result of trickery and sexual humiliation. Folk cunning is used to bestow justice, not formal means. This way of resolution is indicative of carnival logic wherein the oppressed in turn restore power in some symbolic way that parodies authority.

The Carnival inversion is another effect of language. Chaucer also uses contrasts between high and low, courtly and colloquial language based on oral literature. The vulgar language use, sexual connotation, and comic overstatement disrupt the stratification of language in which elite forms of expression take pre -eminence. This is an example of heteroglossia in Bakhtinian terms of multiple voices and registers existing, and no authoritative discourse is dominant in the text. Gendered hierarchy is also left to the carnivalesque inversion, especially in The Wife of Bath Prologue and Tale. The aggressive and experiential voice of The Wife attacks the clerical and patriarchal authority. Using folk wisdom and her own experience instead of academic sources, she reverses the set of priorities according to which male learning is superior to female experience. The end of her story that gives the woman in marriage the sovereignty is symbolically an inversion of gender relations of power, in keeping with the focus of carnival on temporary freedom of normative systems.

Notably, carnival inversion in *The Canterbury Tales* is ambivalent, but not utopian. According to Bakhtin, carnival is not a permanent dismantling of hierarchy, it is in conflict with official culture. Chaucer is ambivalent in that he permits inversion to happen within a frame of a regulated narrative. Pilgrimage is over, social functions are reinstated and no authority is destroyed. But the feeling of inversion has a residual sense of the frailty of power.

Therefore, carnival inversion among *The Canterbury Tales* can be described as symbolic critique of medieval hierarchy. Through situations in which the low overpower the high and popular culture challenges the official ideology, Chaucer shows that hierarchy is not historically determined, but rather divinely ordained. With folk laughter, disruption of the narrative, and corporeal realism, Chaucer turns carnival inversion into a literary mechanism of significant power to challenge authority and, nevertheless, be deeply rooted in the social realities of his time.

Laughter, Folklore and Resistance

Chaucerian folkloric humour is not personal but group in nature. It is an expression of common culture based on oral tradition. Revenge in The Reeve Tale is not performed in legal and moral avenues but in the form of deception and physical shame, which is a popular theme in folk stories. These acts are symbolic in regaining power by social superiors.

Equally, The Wife of Bath Tale of the transformation and sovereignty relies on folk motifs. The issue of what women desire the most makes a challenge of the patriarchal power. Despite being told in a fairy-tale format, the story is a stern attack about male dominance and clerical misogyny.

In each of these, folklore offers an alternative epistemology an epistemology that gives priority to experience, collective wisdom, and embodied knowledge in preference to official doctrine in all such cases.

The Dialogue and Voices Polyphony

The key component of the dialogism is the concept proposed by Bakhtin that helps us to comprehend the narrative strategy of Chaucer. there is no one voice that is predominant in *The Canterbury Tales*. The power is decentralized and disputed via communication between narrators. The discourse of the elite is interrupted by folk voices, and the conflict is where meaning is created and not through consensus.

This dialogic form is a reflection of social processes of carnival in which no point of view is definitive. Chaucer never provides a unified moral judgment, but he lets the relations of power be challenged by the exchange of the narratives. Folklore is therefore an avenue by which the oppressed speak out.

Discussion

The above discussion of inversion and hierarchy of carnivalesque in *The Canterbury Tales* shows that folklore and popular culture are not secondary and comic devices that Chaucer employs. Instead, it serves as a perpetuated cultural plan by which the hierarchical power is questioned, shaken, and restructured symbolically. The discussion below is a summary of the argument in the paper, which places it in larger arguments of power, ideology, and literary representation, where the Bakhtinian carnival is important as an interpretive tool to the work of Chaucer.

The major implication of this work is that carnival inversion in *The Canterbury Tales* is not a rebellion but a form of cultural rebellion. Chaucer does not suggest the breaking down of feudal or ecclesiastical systems, but rather he shows how feeble they are through laughter. In this particular case, the understanding by Bakhtin that laughter kills fear is especially applicable. The characters in authority such as clerics, husbands, scholars and officials are comic, bodily, and fallible in the fabliau and folk-based tales of Chaucer. This diminishment of authority to the extent to which is the human body plays with its aura of sacredness and inevitability.

The hierarchy discussion also highlights the high level of understanding hierarchy that was relative and not absolute as Chaucer did. In *The Canterbury Tales*, talks,

control of narratives, and socialization are all sources of power that are negotiated around all the time. This interruption of the narrative by the Miller is representative of the sequencing of the narrative itself as a place of power conflict. Giving such disturbances room, Chaucer prescribes the unstable nature of social structure and undermines the belief that power is simply a natural extension of rank or education.

What is more, the carnivalesque mode allows Chaucer to express a plurality of truths. The official culture of the middle ages was oriented towards the monologic truth which was approved by the Church or the nobility. *The Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, do not support closure and moral finality due to the dialogic nature of the structure. Different stories, voices, and views do exist without any reconciliation towards a single authoritative meaning. This plurality is quite consistent with the concept of dialogism developed by Bakhtin where the meaning can be created through interaction and not through imposition. Folklore, in being an oral and communally constructed mode, is especially well placed within this dialogic vision.

The concept of gender comes out as a significant aspect of a carnival resistance in the discourse. The narrative authority of The Wife of Bath is an excellent example of how carnivalesque inversion is not limited to the level of class but is also directed to the male dominance. Her experience-based approach to learning challenges the epistemological inequality that favours male learning. Although it does not create a new gender equality, her story helps to see the artificiality

of the male dominance and creates a vacuum in which one can imagine other forms of gender relationship. This supports the fact that carnival does not eliminate hierarchy but temporarily exposes its precariousness.

The other important aspect of discussion is the ambivalence of carnival. Bakhtin points out that carnival is two-faceted, as it is the release and, at the same time, it is the release that is placed within temporal and spatial boundaries. This ambivalence is reflected in Chaucer who inserts carnivalesque scenes into a framework of a narrative. The pilgrimage which is controlled by the rules of the Host offers controlled freedom instead of anarchy. This captivity implies that Chaucer recognizes the subversive possibility of the popular culture and the constraints of the popular culture. Folklore may be symbolically rebellious against authority, but does not break outside of the very frameworks that give rise to it.

Another point that is brought up in the discussion is the role of Chaucer as a mediator between elite and popular cultures. Being a court poet and having a profound knowledge of the aristocratic conventions, the selection of folk materials by Chaucer can be viewed as an intentional aesthetic decision and not the naive realism. Using folklore in a piece of literature work, he raises the status of popular culture, and at the same time, he submits it to the creative influence of literature. This bi-polar stance makes it hard to read Chaucer as either a radical or a conservative author. Rather, he comes out as a subtle commentator of power who identifies the needlessness and vulnerability of hierarchy.

Integral Research

(ISSN: 3048-5991) Coden: IRABCA

Research Article
(Peer-reviewed, Open Access & Indexed
Multidisciplinary Journal)
Journal home page: https://integralresearch.in/
Vol. 03, No. 02, February. 2026

Lastly, the Bakhtinian theory applied to a medieval English text prompts one to consider the carnival trans-historicity. Even though Bakhtin constructed his concepts with references to the Renaissance culture, their relevance to *The Canterbury Tales* proves that carnival logic is not related to moments in history. The text of Chaucer prefigures contemporary issues of voice, marginality, and resistance, and as such, it predetermines the appearance of other literary traditions that used folklore as a symbolic tool to critique power.

Altogether, the above conversation supports the fact that carnivalesque inversion in *The Canterbury Tales* is a literary device that helps Chaucer challenge the hierarchical authority without necessarily promoting the outright rejection of it. Chaucer reveals the ideological underpinnings of authority through folk laughter, bodily realism, and dialogic plurality and supports the expressive possibilities of the popular culture. Not only is this reading an addition to the Chaucerian literature, but it strengthens the more general critical analysis of folklore as a moving point of cultural negotiation and resistance.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer has used Bakhtinian carnival and folklore as a form of resistance to the hierarchical power of the medieval period. The work opposes the feudal, clerical and patriarchal power using folk humour, bodily imagery and dialogic narration. The carnival in Chaucer is more than just celebratory but also politically vibrant as it displays the ability of popular culture to challenge the mainstream ideology.

Through foregrounding voices below, Chaucer predicts subsequent literature, which makes use of folklore as a form of social commentary. The work emphasizes the applicability of the Bakhtin theory to the medieval literature and the timelessness of folklore as a source of cultural resistance.

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