

PATRIARCHAL SUBVERSION THROUGH THE CARNIVALESQUE IN HUBERT SELBY'S *REQUIEM FOR A DREAM*

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Abstract

*American authors, like Hubert Selby, deconstruct the American Dream and display its evils in narratives such as *Requiem for a Dream*, where characters spiral into a realm of chaos. Thereby, subverting their American Dream into realities of drugs, prostitution, and hysteria. The aim of the research is to explore how the carnivalesque realm is an apparatus of subversion that provides emancipation for women. The research ultimately asserts that the carnival laughter is the highest form of wisdom that enables women to practise their agency through unconventional ways such as hysteria and prostitution, subverting conventional feminine standards. The research is a delimited character study of the females in the novel. The primary tool for research is a novel, *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby. The secondary source of research is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the Carnavalesque in *Rabelais and His World*. It is qualitative research. The research concludes that dominant structures are subverted by placing the female characters in a carnivalesque space. It gives birth to an inverted world structure. that allows the Lowly Genres to have a taste of freedom. This presents an ambivalent image of the conventional woman, who attains freedom by subversion, marketplace language, defecation, urination, and sexual intercourse. The research study opens horizons for a novel which had hitherto been viewed as a contemporary tragedy only. Future researchers can navigate structures of masculinity in the novel.*

Keywords: Carnavalesque, American Literature, Carnival Laughter, Feminism, Patriarchal Subversion, Bakhtinian Discourse.

Introduction:

Hubert Selby Jr. is an American writer, who rapidly gained recognition for his novels, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *Requiem for a Dream*. In the early sixties, Selby got two of his short stories published that were highly appreciated for their crude and unorthodox stylistic choices. Many critics rebuked his work for its brutality.

As modern as his ideas were, Selby wrote in an avant-garde style that deviated from traditional prose writing style. He averted from using punctuation and used slashes instead of apostrophes. With Beat Literature as his influence, Selby Jr. heavily relied on the stream of consciousness and intense dialogues. The Beat Movement was a literary movement that was popularized by Silent Generationers in the 1950s. It primarily embraced the disillusionment in the booming post-World War II economy that focused on the exploration of sexual liberation, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, rejection of both conventional and religious narratives.

Ross Haenfler defines the Beat generation as, "a social subgroup distinguishable from mainstream culture by its non-normative values, beliefs, symbols, activities, and often, in the case of youth, styles and music" (3). Furthermore, individuality and personal experiences were heavily celebrated to give voice to all experiences. It is noticed that the American Dream is a

recurrent theme in the Beat generation. Similarly, Hubert Selby Jr. embodies the same spirit and unveils the horrors and failure of the American Dream, rebelling against the conventions of mainstream American life and writing. Moreover, Selby Jr. spent most of his life in bleak realms of pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts and thieves. In fact, his experiences and contemplation with the above mentioned had provoked him to become a writer.

Hubert Selby Jr's philosophical thought revolves around the existential angst amongst his characters upon the subversion of fate and consequences of achieving the American Dream, which is equivalent to his life as well. Unfortunately, at the age of seventeen, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was sent back home to Brooklyn. With recurrent hospitalization, Selby went through frequent surgeries but got addicted to morphine. To his surprise, an experimental drug from the black market had saved his life as he enjoyed the adrenaline rush that he received from the drugs in his treatment. His lifelong dream was to become a composer but due to inadequate education, his dream was not fulfilled so he became a writer. His short stories such as "The Queen is Dead" and "Tralala" revolved around drug addicts, prostitutes, transvestites, and the society's dirtbags with whom he was well acquainted.

Requiem for a Dream by Hubert Selby Jr. is a manifestation of the decay and subversion of New York where the four protagonists, Harry Goldfarb, Sara Goldfarb, Marion Kleinmeitz, and Tyrone C. Love, spiral down in efforts to make their lives better. Unfortunately, they all lose a sense of harmony and empathy as they are separated from each other to chase their dreams. It is not simply a novel on addiction. Sara Goldfarb ends up in an asylum in attempts to pursue her dream to appear on television. Harry Goldfarb loses his arm to heroin addiction in attempts to make his life better and start a business with his girlfriend, Marion Kleinmeitz. She also resorts to prostitution after Harry leaves to find a living but is not able to make it. Whereas Tyrone C. Love is sent to a prison where he is maltreated. The novel, in fact, focuses on how man is a slave to his dreams and gives voice to the issues of the dirtbags of the society. Thereby, presenting another version of the American Dream that goes unnoticed amidst its glorifications.

The theory of the Carnavalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin stands for the inverted state of the world. Bakhtin had a keen interest in Medieval, European carnivals. It was one occasion where power dynamics were subverted, be it political, legal, or the ideological authority of both, the church and state. Carnavalesque imagery exhibits the mischievous spirit of the Carnival which mocks authority and subverts power relationships. By emphasizing the body, laughter, and role play, it attempts to create a new world. It seeks to reinvent new order with the help of dirt or reproductive organs. It not only has a degenerating, negative aspect but also paves way to a rebirth of order. This grants an individual a new status in the society where he is reborn. In the light of Bakhtin's theoretical framework, "the place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels" (67). The research study aims to highlight how subversive acts of women are synonymous with emancipation from societal norms. The objective of the research study is to analyse the female characters in Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* seeking emancipation from subversion in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.

The American Dream, in conventional American writing and life, is a highly glorified phenomenon that is often misleading. It is often associated with glitz and glamour, alongside heroism. However, there is a large portion of history that is not presented: the heinous side of the American Dream. As a result, many narratives have either been ignored or silenced due to conventional writing. However, in the 1950s, the Beat Movement emerged as a product of rebellion, which tore the heroism of the American Dream and presented the other side of the coin. It not only presents the horrors of the American Dream but also gives voice to the

downtrodden. As a result, highly established structures are subverted to give birth to a new order. It gives a taste of freedom to the lower class, albeit for a short time.

The carnivalesque elevates the stature of the woman to a divine pedestal whereas the man is a vessel of destruction. Such empowerment is attained by unconventional behaviour which also defies the patriarchal standards of the ideal woman. To attain female emancipation, it is necessary to provide women subversion to assert themselves in a world of conventions. Thus, the paper aims to explore how the female characters in Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* seek emancipation through subversion.

Bakhtin paints an ambiguous image of women, both “destructive and joyfully reasserting” (241). E. Jane Burns described it as “gender-less conclusions that excuse antifeminism of the worst kind as if it were a purely rhetorical mode without historical consequence” (13-14). Bromilow agrees that antifeminism does not only exist on a textual level, rather it depicts a historically negative representation. It is also further argued how Bakhtin presents an analysis that focusses on the female body but does not talk about its “subjectivity in practice” in the theoretical framework (“Female Bodies in Rabelais”). Despite many negative views, Elizabeth Chesney-Zegura reviewed “Rabelais and His World” in a more positive light. She claims that the author “experiments with a nonauthoritarian, almost feminine narrative voice in order to interrogate phallogocentric culture” (9-10). According to Chedgzoy, the grotesque body and violent revelry depicts different meanings for both genders. As a result, in a patriarchal society, the subversion of women is seen as disorder. Natalie Zemon Davis, in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, lays down the role of women in famous festivities and acts of insurgence. She captures carnivalesque traits and argues that women have a vital symbolic relevance to the carnival as they are granted “partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society” (13).

In her most poignant essay “Women as Prophets during the English Civil War”, Mack writes how women, in the early modern period, were assumed to be bestowed with prophecy when they depicted outbursts echoing illogical, emotional, and impressionable cries. Consequently, their supposed hysteria intertwines with discourses of prophecy and the carnivalesque. Mack states that the carnivalesque inversion was a means to the vitality of the prophetess's figure and utterances:

The combination of her despised status and her ecstatic, yet authoritative, behaviour made the female prophet a perfect symbol of a world turned upside down.... She represents a spiritual and political authority which was inappropriate, even monstrous, by conventional standards, but conforming to a more profound and more radical vision of human equality, on earth and in heaven (219).

Giles suggests, in the light of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, that “sex, work, and the life of the streets all revolve around structures of power” (35). It is in these scenarios that the victims have given up their individuality and souls to the oppressive dominant structure and the anger instilled due to their helplessness towards power dynamics. Furthermore, he opines in *Understanding Hubert Selby Jr, Requiem for a Dream* the American drug culture had a great potential to destroy every fibre present in the American society (33). Through this, the author “clearly intended to shock and outrage readers and to challenge the conventions of decorum, restraint, and affirmative humanism” (1) that were pivotal elements of American fiction since the nineteenth century.

According to *Censorship: A World Encyclopaedia*, one of Selby's most renowned novels, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, was subjected to an obscenity trial in England. It was prosecuted in 1967 for containing “dirty words, violent acts, transvestism, and homosexual pimping” (Jones 1089). Such literary elements were employed by Selby to protest, like the Beat

generation, against the reigning institutions. In such attempts, one must portray the bleak reality that goes unnoticed.

The woman in Selbian fiction is seen as the corrupting agency for the male. Giles asserts that Mary in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* becomes a “hostile male perception” as she plays the role of “ironic signifier for a countermyth” (33). Moreover, the female genitalia are largely hated and feared by male characters as they become a tool of both, pleasure and degradation. Therefore, the divine figure of motherhood and a new life is subverted to an exhibition of death and barrenness.

The Carnavalesque is a literary mode that works to subvert and liberate dominant designs through humour and chaos. This ideology is traced from the merrymaking and festivity that took place in Roman Catholic countries before Lent, that promotes fasting and abstaining from meat, specifically in the last days or hours. Despite an uncertain derivation of the word, suggestions are that it is traced from the medieval Latin *carnem levare* or *carnelevarium*, which means to “take away” or “remove meat”. Moreover, the possible historical roots of the carnival are enriched by primitive festivals that honoured the rebirth of nature. It is also felt that the concept of Carnival is inspired by the pagan Saturnalian festival of ancient Rome that felt like an escape from the work-a-day world.

Since the research paper sheds light on the female characters in the light of the carnivalesque, a woman’s body is a vessel of rebirth where she sheds off the terminated and waste. She becomes an ambivalent phenomenon where she feels joy within her destruction. This grants her a new status in society where she is reborn. The research study discusses how women seek emancipation through rebirth, via destruction. For that, the female characters are observed from the perspective of the carnival, to justify that subversion is a means of emancipation for them.

Presentation of the Carnavalesque in the Novel

Hubert Selby Jr’s *Requiem for a Dream* exhibits the subversion of the American Dream. It is based on struggling characters who try to seek a better living but end up in depths of despair, abandonment and agony. However, the female characters, Marion Silver and Sara Goldfarb find empowerment even in deterioration. This awakens a spirit of rebirth through unconventional mediums such as hysteria, prostitution, marketplace language, cuckoldry and defecation.

The spirit of the carnivalesque is dependent on subversion. It is only through subversion that roles are inverted. Moreover, after inversion, highly established hierarchies are broken down. The name, Marion, originates from Christianity. Blessed Virgin Mary is an embodiment of purity and divine femininity. However, the essence of holy Mary is “uncrowned” (Bakhtin 383). This subversion is only possible because Marion belongs to the lower class. Secondly, the constructs of the chaste female body are subverted as it becomes the “bodily grave” of Harry (Bakhtin 240). It denotes how Marion uses her body as a means of liberation which eventually foreshadows Harry’s downfall. According to the New Testament, Marion means bitter or rebellion. Thus, her name reflects the breakage of highly established conventions of femininity into a hostile perception of a fallen woman.

Furthermore, Marion is referred to as a “pisser” by a passer-by (35). As soon as Marion and her boyfriend, Harry, make it to a cheap diner, she contemplates and protests at the comment. She states how men urinating publicly in the street is perfect, whereas women are ridiculed. The image and act of urination is ambivalent as it is not only the images of the lower body, but also, a symbol of rejuvenation. The portrayal of Marion urinating in public denotes it as a “blessing and humiliation” (Bakhtin 151).

Sara Goldfarb is Harry’s father. After the death of her husband, she led a lonely life. This why Sara Goldfarb got addicted to watching television to an extent that it became her

home and a safe space. It was the only thing that made sense to her. As a result, it was her dream to appear on television. One day, she receives a call from Lyle Russel from McDick Cooperation, suggesting that she got selected to be on the “most *poignant*” show (16). The corporation’s name is a farce as dick is an informal slang term for the male reproductive organ, penis. It is noteworthy that Bakhtin states that the carnivalesque is “closely combined with images of the material bodily lower stratum” (223). Bakhtin’s phenomenon of degradation is based on the vitality of the lower region of the body that includes suggesting food, defecation, urination, buttocks, and sex. This suggests a new awakening in Goldfarb. She gains emancipation through her hysteria. In that hysterical realm, Sara has everything that she has wished for such as her fitting in the red dress and appearing on television. It is a state where she feels empowered. In fact, it becomes the source of meaning in her aimless life. Hence, the subversion endorsed by Marion and Sara are dependent on defecation and urination.

Marion’s American Dream is to open a coffee business with her boyfriend and to display her paintings. However, as the plot progresses, Selby paints an innate disapproval in her as she pushes her sketch pad and pencil aside whilst contemplating her stash (154). She enjoys “the feeling of power and security” from her drugs (154). This enables her to accept a pimp’s offer to become a sexual spectacle. With the help of her body, she reclaims herself. Marion sells off her body to prostitution to earn money to not only survive but to empower herself financially. With this money, she buys the drugs that gives her relief. Her stash of drugs symbolizes her carnival revelry that she induces. With this portrayal of a nonconventional woman, she gains emancipation. According to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, the woman is a means of both rebirth and destruction. The woman in the world of the carnivalesque acts subversively and rebels against the patriarchal standards of femininity. Marion resorts to prostitution to empower herself. She was happy while hugging herself knowing that all the heroine was hers alone. This scene lays the foundation of the grotesque woman who is not only a joyful exhibition but also, destructive. Bakhtin claims that the appearance of the grotesque is a representation of change, which is announced by an upside-down world with a carnivalesque spirit.

Bakhtin states that language is “directly linked with the life of the people, bearing its mark of nonofficial freedom” (153). It not only breaks social and moral order but also grants others immense freedom. This leads to a carnivalesque laughter. In this way, it is possible for individuals like Marion to express themselves freely. It is important to refer to the film adaptation of *Requiem for a Dream* because it further strengthens the argument of the research study. Marion shouts at Harry, “I fucked that sleezebag for you... you fucking loser!” (*Requiem for a Dream* 01:07:46-01:07:50). She hurls abuses at him for ruining their plan to get money. However, Harry fails. Consequently, Marion achieves her dream and Self on her own. Abusive language, known as Marketplace language in Bakhtinian discourse, acts as not only a relief for Marion, but also a means of emancipation.

Furthermore, Marion is involved in a sexual relationship with her therapist, Arnold. Despite her partner’s disapproval, Marion is imbued with a need to meet her therapist. She goes to fancy restaurants with him and gets cash in return. In the light of the Bakhtinian carnival, the theme of cuckoldry springs. According to the Gallic tradition narrated by Bakhtin, the previous husband is not only mocked but beaten, signifying the “uncrowned old age” (240). This idea is depicted with an amputated Harry, lying unconscious in the hospital bed. The idea is further reiterated in the film adaptation when Harry dreams of chasing Marion but in attempts to do so, he falls and wakes up, tied to a hospital bed with just one arm. Furthermore, he cries knowing that Marion will never come

to see him (*Requiem for a Dream* 1:33:28-1:34:22). Thus, Marion is the “bodily grave” of her boyfriend, Harry Goldfarb (Bakhtin 240).

While the woman is empowered, the man is at risk. He stands as the “old year” where he is stripped of his status (Bakhtin 241). Thereby, suggesting that the man is mocked. This denotes that Marion is empowered by subversive behaviour whereas Harry is mocked. It results into his decline. He is not only gets to live his American Dream but is left with one arm.

To appear on television, Sara Goldfarb wanted to appear perfect on stage. As a result, she decided to lose weight. Sara Goldfarb’s diet plan to lose weight to fit the red dress actively plays a role in her subversion. Sara’s body is also displayed as a grotesque spectacle of degradation. She tells herself that when the company shall ask her name, she will call herself “Red Riding Hood” (34). This denotes the “deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed” (Bakhtin 26). In the case of Sara, this representation is grotesque because one cannot imagine an old woman wearing a colour that represents youth. Thus, it forms an ambivalent image where Sara Goldfarb is defying feminine standards set by patriarchy. She creates her own meaning and identity consequently. This leads to hysteria. Moreover, Sara’s zombie-like appearance with “sunken eyes, the wet, straggly hair hanging and clinging” further exhibits the grotesque (131). Due to such a condition, she was admitted to an asylum. It is noteworthy that the asylum offers a carnivalesque space for Sara Goldfarb. Asylums exhibit subversion of the mind and in Sara’s case, it is her hysteria that creates her identity and remains steadfast.

The above-mentioned discussion sheds light on many actions that ultimately lead the characters to the carnival laughter. Acts like defecation, cuckoldry, marketplace language, prostitution and hysteria are the key factors that lead to subversion. In this way, the characters, Marion and Sara, are empowered. Thus, the Selbian women lay down concerns of destruction that ushers in a new meaning of life by dismantling the ethos of femininity.

Presentation of Emancipation in the Novel

The carnival provides emancipation for the new spirit and order. Bakhtin narrates that the “heroes of folk humour always descend to hell” (396). In the light of *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby Jr, his female characters have their fair share of descent towards destruction which provides them a rebirth. The Gallic tradition of Rabelais and Selby’s New York provides the same carnivalesque space for its inhabitants. Marion is a bit hesitant at first to become a voyeuristic spectacle but later gives in at the expense of attaining the drugs. The grotesque Aronofsky’s film adaptation of the novel enhances the hellish apartment, where Marion enters as she lays down on the couch (Aronofsky 1:34:31-1:34:43). She has smeared eyeliner all over her eyes with a smile plastered on her face and lets out a laughter with her paintings scattered and torn. (Aronofsky 1:35:37-1:35:52). This depicts her status as the woman of the Gallic tradition that exuberates an “ambivalent laughter, at once mocking, destructive, and joyfully reasserting” (Bakhtin 240). According to Luce Irigaray in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (qtd in Abrams & Harpham 13) a woman’s writing must unveil the wonders behind “diversity, fluidity, and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and the functions of female sexual experiences”, not upon the inflexible phallus (93).

Furthermore, Sara Goldfarb, despite her mental descent to chaos and destruction, stares blankly at the screen. It exhibits her steadfastness. Selby elucidates how the medication was already affecting the rest of the patients, but Sara Goldfarb remained steadfast. This shows her resilience as she stands her ground firmly and gives in to her hysteria. To further substantiate the argument, the director displays the rightful presentation of the carnival laughter of Sara

Goldfarb. She is entrapped in her psychiatric ward, aimlessly looking at the roof, with a grin plastered on her face, envisioning herself in the red dress at the television show (Aronofsky 1:36:16-1:37:24). This exhibits hysteria as a means of empowerment for

All in all, Selby's *Requiem for a Dream* is a carnivalesque space where Sara Goldfarb and Marion Kleinmeitz practice their agency through the destruction of their dreams. Undergoing subversion through the practice of marketplace language, defecation, hysteria, drugs, prostitution, and sexual intercourse, they signify an authority that defies conventional norms. They appear to be monstrous yet a divine image of rebirth. Thereby, representing an ambivalent image. Thus, their carnival laughter has a "deep philosophical meaning" which alludes to breaking societal norms and traditions imposed on women (Bakhtin 66). This ultimately alludes to the woman of Gallic tradition whose image is on the horns of dilemma, both a vessel of death and life.

Conclusion

Through the above discussion, the study has proven that the carnivalesque space offers women immense room for emancipation to rise against patriarchal norms. The carnivalesque dismantles dominant ideological structures. Such elements include subversion, marketplace language, defecation, urination, and sexual intercourse. This paves a path to the carnival laughter, which symbolizes a new life. Furthermore, the lowly genres consist of marginalized identities and gender. True to form, Marion and Sara exist in a carnivalesque space. They act subversively by performing unconventional acts that women are particularly shamed for, such as urinating publicly or indulging in sexual intercourse. Thus, it portrays an "ambivalent" image of the conventional woman (Bakhtin 240). She is a crossover of both, birth and death, which represents the spirit of the carnivalesque. By challenging and subverting the ethos of their American Dream, Marion Kleinmeitz and Sara Goldfarb adopt subversive and unruly behaviour to empower themselves through the world of prostitution and hysteria. Thus, they gain independence and power.

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