Chapter-VI

CONCLUSION

“Perhaps what is most striking about the work of Mikhail Bakhtin is the diversity of areas and range of disciplines across which it is invoked” (Morris, 1994: 1). Bakhtin indeed was fascinated by plentitude of differences and plurality, the mystery of the one and the many. “However, Bakhtin’s texts are far from mere exercises in accommodation. They may be read at many levels ... In his writings he was simultaneously an impassioned ideologue for his own outlook and an impressive ventriloquist for politically acceptable locutions” (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 2). One could simply say, as many have done, that Bakhtin’s work is social criticism because where others saw expressions, statements, or signs, Bakhtin looked for, and inevitably found ‘dialogues’, precise acts of communication, with multiple participants.

Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival as a communication model has much to recommend it. Though rooted in the folk-culture, its potency for subversion may be located everywhere in the impulse of the people or mass to gain freedom from the stasis imposed by the official world.
The ideal of the carnival is the grotesque body that is open-ended and irregular, which has no need of symmetrical beauty, feats of self-discipline etc. Its processes and appetites constitute a common ‘language’ native to all humans; it is identical, involuntary and non-negotiable. Whereas the high official language is learned, intellectual, internalized and self-conscious, the language of the grotesque is associated to the body and therefore involuntary and unselfconscious. The energy and material structure of this grotesque realism is turned towards the outside world in a frank friendly way. The communal baseness or the vigour of the earthly existence is the foundation of Bakhtin’s carnival logic. Its laughter is in part defiant and rejuvenating. Always in the act of becoming, it is a triumph over classical form, institutional oppression and individual death.

This spirit of the carnival is deeply imbued in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel that he conceives of in a very broad framework. According to Clark and Holquist, the novel is for him not just another literary genre but a special kind of force, which he calls ‘novelness’. He assigns the term ‘novel’ to “whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of that system as inadequate, imposed or.
arbitrary. Literary systems are composed of canons, and the novel is fundamentally anticanonical. It does not permit generic monologue. It insists on a dialogue between texts that a given system admits as literature and those texts that are excluded from such a definition. The novel is a kind of epistemological outlaw, a Robin Hood of texts.” (1984: 276)

Thus ‘novelness’ can work to undermine the official or high culture of any society — a spirit that is imbued in the carnival tradition. Bakhtin traces this tendency in times when the novel as a special form was non-existent. He charts its history as a critique of a given culture’s higher literary forms by its lower forms, as in Cervante’s parody of knightly romances, or Sterne and Fielding’s sentimental fiction. But according to Clark and Holquist, these are merely late examples of a tendency that Bakhtin found in the Socratic dialogue. The Socratic belief in the importance of self-consciousness is played out in the drama of a dialogue that corresponds closely to the role of the novel. This role has later assumed unexpected forms as the confession, the Utopia or the Menippean satire. Bakhtin attaches great significance to the Menippean satire in the evolution of the novel as it uses the language of irreverent
laughter. As a discursive practice, the novel has its origin in the discourse of the comic. Laughter, according to Bakhtin, is the key to freedom. Freeing language from the authoritarian monologism of myths, laughter destroys the epic or any canonized form. Laughter undermines the epic through the parodic travestying forms it assumes in literature, and these forms prepare the ground for the novel. It is a ground for contest between the word and the ‘inappropriate word’ that is either cynically frank, profane, or devoid of any etiquette and is characteristic of the menippea. The novel is a game of ultimate questions because it calls into question the readymade truths of official monologism.

Placing R.K. Narayan’s novels in the carnival tradition has yielded unexpected results of ‘novelness’. The supposedly tame and homely world of Narayan (so different from the zealous attempts of his contemporaries to capture the spirit of a so-called crisis of history) within the Bakhtinian framework reveals an antithetical or reverse form of the ideal. History is not a linear journey. It is a form of energy that follows its own instinctive or non-idealistic impulses. While British imperialism in India instigated the idealistic revolutions for freedom and self-governance, the common mass, isolated from the strategies of
politics or incapable of the idealized intellectual involvements, pursued the material. This materialization of human life is a counter revolutionary stance in that the power of laughter was underpinned against all serious, stratified and oppressive regimes. Thus the ordinary people that swarm Narayan’s novels are not passive observers of history, waiting for their intellectual and powerful counterparts to decide their fate, but are active agents who create their own history that would forever sabotage all forms of canonization or totalitarian endeavours of the official world — whether in the form of British imperialism or their own nationalism.

Narayan’s polyphonic style of presenting the world of Malgudi creates a dialogic truth that renders the average Indian, not into any preconceived stereotype, but as part of an unending discourse. The impossibility of any single character to hold the stage is substantiated by a democratic and unbiased treatment of all characters. Thus Gandhi’s humanitarian doctrine is posited on equal standing with grandma’s niche of gods and goddesses, the vigour and energy of Vasu’s capitalist enterprise equally vies with Nataraj’s smooth artistry of an elegant lifestyle. Even in an atmosphere charged with feminist disapprobation.
and revolt, where wives are betrayed (as in the cases of Savitri and Sampath’s wife) or the beloveds are exploited (as Raju exploits Rosie’s talent to mint money, or Raman attempts to violate Daisy’s honour) the men too have their own stories. Instead of following a monologic intention or goal, the novels turn out to be the ground for incessant debate. The democratization of language results in the creation of the ambience that promotes intertextual ideals. The characters may seem average and common, but they are not vulgarized. Even in their carnal weaknesses, the Rajus, Vasus and Jagans create their own unique ideals to bless their erratic lives with a touch of a human and pathetic beauty. In this world if the birth of a superhuman is not predictable similarly a villain’s perversion is not going to shake the earthly ambience. This is a world of joyful relativity that is almost utopian.

This non-idealistic amoral world is not ashamed of its petty squabbles, tricks and exploitations. The unsentimental rendering of the victims has the effect of stark inevitability; on the one hand the victors too are not left to remain smugly self-satisfied, on the other the seeds of bohemian restlessness in their nature turn their lives unpredictable and irredeemable. The episodic history of Raju’s life from the Railway
guide to the Swami on the bank of Sarayu launches him finally at the door of death; he leaves behind him an unfulfilled history of cherished dreams woven around Rosie’s love, an elevated aristocratic life and also a weak secret corner for his estranged mother — never to be recovered or retrieved. Thus thrown from one episode to another, swung in the dilemma of unheroic triumph and glory the characters of Narayan with their human fallibility remain indefinable forever.

The rogue characters of Narayan wear the carnival mask that defies all expectancy for symmetry and beauty by highlighting the orifices, while glorifying the carnal appetites. This frees them from the binding strictures of social norms and turns their lives into an unrestrained celebration. While the serious modes of literature depict time as being gradually wasted at the cost of growth and maturation, here time is conceived as of profound experience. The characters violate all natural boundaries and instead of suffering the tedious process of maturation and growth they choose the shortest route — they metamorphose.

Narayan’s characters are gifted with an overdose of wit and practical intelligence; however, this bounty of nature is balanced by a
lack of the other mental faculties leading to the depth in character. So, very often, they display much shortsightedness on their part when faced with problems requiring a depth and richness of understanding. Thus Raju loses Rosie forever as he proves insensitive to her mental requirements, Jagan’s escape in the name of banaprastha is the proof of his inability to solve the puzzle of his son who has all the maladies of a new generation, and the otherwise clever Margayya inadvertently misappropriates his wealth to buy his son’s affection while spoiling him in the process. These characters are irreverent to all social codes and possess their own unique worldviews that launch them in precarious positions in society. This happens in the case of Sampath. That Shanti and his wife would live in blissful harmony sharing him under one roof is Sampath’s ardent dream – a dream which could only be actualized in the fantasy world of imagination. For Margayya the value of money outgrows all its material boundaries into the realm of everything noble and elegant, i.e. for him, a noble and respectable life entails a history of selfish acquisition. This is in utter contradiction to the official value-system, and the prudence of the idealists against the material. This contradiction with social ideologies turns Narayan’s characters
ambivalent. Their story is forever double-voiced, emanating a sense of both praise and abuse, crowning and decrowning, ridicule and celebration. These stories are antcanonical, as they cannot be categorized as completely happy and harmonious or tragically sad, in the process exposing the limitedness and inadequacy of a given system to depict truth. Because of such duality and ambiguity in the structure, these stories turn into travesties of the given canonical genres.

The story of Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts has the potency of a passionate love-story. Chandran is a youth fresh out of college who falls in love with the vague image of a tall girl clad in a green saree. Chandran in his shyness had hardly looked into the girl’s face, but his passion creates a Platonic ideal that he starts worshipping day and night. Yet the inbuilt irony in the novel turns the story into a parody of romance, for after suffering innumerable sleepless nights, incessant day dreams, desperate window-gazing, and the ultimate sanyashood when the girl’s parents do not relent to their marriage, Chandran immediately starts cherishing the next girl that his parents wish him to marry. This fickleness on Chandran’s part fractures the myth of love as ideal, an ideal that is immortalized by the world-famous romances of Romeo and
Juliet or Laila and Majnu. Narayan’s use of irony awakens the readers to the everyday realities of life where fickleness of youth in love continues to create paradoxes.

Savitri’s story too has all the anxieties of a feminist text, and along with Savitri’s pathetic attempt of committing suicide the message against male dominance could hit real hard. Yet the dialogic nature of the work along with Savitri’s own submission to the more practical requirements of life like the duty for one’s own children and the economic security renders a different dimension to her story. It is a story from the heart of middle-class life and it requires no banner to convey the truth.

Materialization and debasement are characteristics that constitute the basic tenets and also the logistics of Narayan’s novels. This carnival tendency fortifies the stories with an earthy solidity, thereby preventing any highflying abstraction to mystify the material truths of human life. Thus Raju remains the fallible human being beneath his ascetic garb, solidly feeling the crunches of hunger along with a fear of losing his face to the worshipping crowd. The Swami in A Tiger performs the impossible task when he befriends the awesome tiger, but Narayan
brings him down to earth by supplying a very human story of his past. For Narayan, the solid materiality of human life should provide the ground for all truths; the tendency to legitimize abstract thoughts or ideas by compromising or adjusting human life to fit into them results in confusion. In an interview Narayan had stated:

I’d be quite happy if no more is claimed from me than being just a story-teller. Only the story matters, that is all. If readers read more significance into my stories than was meant originally, then that’s the reader’s understanding of things. But if a story is in tune completely with the truth of life, truth as I perceive it, then it will be automatically significant. (quoted in Benson & Conolly, 1994: 1082)

Narayan’s statement implies a rejection of the grand canonized past that is usually held as the measuring ground for the present reality. Similar views may be heard in Arnold Bennett’s private notes:

Every scene, even the commonest, is wonderful, if only one can detach oneself, casting off all memory of use and custom, and behold it (as it were) for the first time; in its right, authentic colours; without making comparisons. The novelist should cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply, artlessly, ignorantly; of seeing like a baby or a lunatic, who lives each moment of itself and tarnishes the present by no remembrances of the past. (quoted in Allen, Walter, 1949: 24)

Narayan, like many humanists, takes recourse to the actual, lived experiences as referential operations of the human mind as a basis for
literary theory. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Augustan humanist recommended an honest and compulsively dualistic look at human realities because:

Man is both a consistent and an inconsistent being, a lover of art when it imitates nature and of nature when it imitates art, of uniformity and variety, a creature of habit that loves novelty. The principles of art must conform to this capacious being ...” (quoted in Fussell, P., 1969: 123)

This capaciousness of human reality is played upon by a novelist’s dialogic and polyphonic technique. In Bakhtin’s view, the primary dialogic dimension of the novel is rooted in its concern for truth; truth is the stake in the novel’s interaction with life. The novel does not pretend to possess a ready-made truth, but as in Socratic dialogue it is born between people collectively searching for truth.

It often happens that in order to foreground a favourite idea writers and critics tend to use rhetoric with subtle maneuver that submerge all other dissenting voices or ideas. In her work Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism (1992), Patricia Waugh has criticized the reductionist and totalizing tendency of both the defenders and detractors of postmodernism. She has shown how, for polemical purposes (to highlight Postmodernism as a refutation of the
epistemological ground of Realism) the defenders have generalized Realism as the expression of a belief in a commonly experienced phenomenological world where language functions simply as a medium through which the reality is re-presented. Waugh points out that this is a purposive or strategic ignorance of the use of irony and linguistic playfulness in many realistic works. Similarly, she points out that the detractors like Eagleton ignore the specific strategies of postmodern artefacts in order to proclaim a generalized condemnation of postmodernism as the logic of commodification. According to Waugh, the only escape from such generalizations of theorists is a close engagement with actual works of art because “literature can only examine an ideology by embodying it (even if in an ironic mode), so that if theorists can operate through reductive totalisations, fictional texts by their very nature have an inbuilt resistance to this.” (1992: 59)

While Bakhtin’s long term legacy is perhaps yet to be assessed, he has atleast drawn aesthetics out of the realm of passive appreciation and academic curiosity. Under his influence, the aesthetics of verbal art is joined with the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human life. If, as
Bakhtin claims, the novel carries on an uninterrupted dialogue with life; then any theory of the novel must do the same.

Many literary commentators, according to Waugh are drawn to Bakhtin because his concept of dialogism sees knowledge of world, self and other, as always historically situated, relational, open-ended and perspectival, a process shifting through time and space. This frustrates all tendencies of reductionism and totalisation because Bakhtinian insights “show how consideration of the literary text may modify one’s reading of theory; just as theoretical awareness may modify one’s aesthetic experience.” (1992: 60)

Addressing not simply the characteristics but the metaphysics of literature as well, Bakhtin has led literary theory beyond its traditional confines to include such diverse disciplines as epistemology, sociology and linguistics. The term he uses to portray his activity is not ‘literary theory’ but ‘philosophical anthropology’; others describe it as an ‘existential philosophy’. The impact of Bakhtin’s thought has been felt throughout the human sciences, and his legacy may travel far and wide.
Analysing the novels of Narayan with the help of Bakhtinian insights has rescued his works from the totalitarian academicist view in which Narayan is categorized as a pure humanist, or the defender of Indian values, or simply a caricaturist. When he is pinioned as a humanist, critics categorically ignore the importance of linguistic playfulness like ironies, parodies, travesties and other self-reflexive modes that thwart or subvert the apparent movement of the story towards an idealistic goal. Thus Raju’s sainthood is often seen as a journey of a rogue towards a humanistic salvation, or Raja the tiger’s tale is unanimously accepted as a fable where the tiger with the help of a guru, emerges from darkness to enlightenment.

Critics often see a pattern of dialectical journey of the imperfect man towards order and unity. In their search for such a definitive pattern they overlook the episodic nature of the novels that forestalls or cancels any unification, but depicts human life as an amalgamation of irrational and multidirectional movements or tendencies.

Again, in assessing Narayan’s humour, critics have tended to evaluate it as an irresponsible and lighthearted attempt to caricature the middleclass fun and foible for the sake of pleasure. But when placed in
the carnival tradition, Narayan's world exposes the serious nature of laughter. The language of carnival laughter brings home to the reader a different dimension of truth that is usually submerged under all sorts of tendentious endeavours of the serious official world. Thus the life of the Malgudi people is the history of the subaltern force that exposes life in its basics and continues to question and rectify the workings of the mainstream authoritarian world. One cannot deny the influence of art and literature over human life. Even the most simple-minded observer of art and literature will look back at his/her own life to detect the reassuring forms of the identical that would enable him/her to metaphorically legitimize art and literature. This process may operate vice-versa. After all, man has nothing but his own life to fall back upon to solve each and every problem that invades his intelligence. Even the extreme version of existentialism cannot work otherwise. In fact it is ironical how the futility and meaninglessness of human life often projected through literature has endowed human life with a sad glory, as if the tragedy of human existence is more attractive than any form of positivism. So, while art endows life with meaningfulness, life too legitimizes art with the solidity of its support.
In this sense the serious monologic works that lead the readers to a sense of personal experience proves attractive, for the cathartic effect on the reader results in a sense of finality of meaning. As the scientists are trying to arrive at a final theory of the universe, so does each and every nondescript person, puzzled by the chaotic state of life, hanker for a finalized impression. Thus monologic writings satisfy the reader more than those writings, which render life as chaotic and unfinalizable. Yet a final theory means a dead end. The polyphonic and carnival world of Narayan defers any final conclusion. The open carnival world acts as a gibe against the solipsism created by man’s monologic tendencies. Carnival in literature democratizes language by frustrating its tendency to centralize meaning. It relativizes all ideologies by providing a uniform platform for their mutual contestation. Finally, carnival emanates a profound sense of acceptance of man as an imperfect, grotesque and clumsy creation – a fool with noble hopes and beautiful dreams. However, a subtle difference with the humanists may be perceived. Humanists like Samuel Johnson have displayed a protective tenderness towards the idea of man’s precarious location between the fact of mortal dissolution and his noble hope for dignity and
redemption, which is touched with pathos because hope deceives. In their conception of human endeavours there is a lingering fear of finding in the end nothing but a "broken promise and an unregarded grave." (Fussel, 1969: 135) But the carnival world, though accepting man's imperfections, is fearless, as its concept of the human kind is rooted in a feeling of community. It is the individual who dies, but man as a part of the greater community is immortal.

The carnival tendency in literature saves it from the possibility of getting stilted. Though the comic genre has never managed to secure the mainstream status, by taunting and teasing the serious modes it has always indicated that the truth of human life is more capacious than it apparently seems. For this reason the great minds like Shakespeare were never satisfied with pure classical forms. Shakespeare's practice of mixing tragedy and comedy is an attempt to underline human desire as multiform and never uniform. Even in the purest of his tragedies the carnival makes an inroad in the form of the clown. In King Lear it is only the clown who is beyond class or status, and thus beyond the whipping ego that delimits the human mind. The clown obeys no social boundaries and the conventions of the hierarchical world – from the
king to the beggar are within his casual access. The language of the clown knows no inhibition, and he incessantly knocks at the stark and closed world of the tragedy with his unpopular opinions. All the veiled social criticism of Shakespeare are uttered by the fool alone, and later by Lear when in his madness he leaves the shammed world to enter the openness of the carnival. In the carnival lies the essence of human nature; without the fool's carnivalesque presence or Lear's inclusion in the apparently insane and chaotic world, the requirement of the tragedy to grasp the truth of life in its essence would have remained unrequited.

In answer to Jonson's objections against fools A.C. Bradley imagines Shakespeare speaking thus:

"Come, my friends, I will show you once for all that the mischief is in you, and not in the fool or the audience. I will have a fool in the most tragic of my tragedies. He shall not play a little part. He shall keep from first to last the company in which you most object to see him, the company of a king. Instead of amusing the king's idle hours, he shall stand by him in the very tempest and whirlwind of passion. Before I have done you shall confess, between laughter and tears, that he is of the very essence of life, that you have known him all your days though you never recognized him, ..." (Bradley, 1904: 258).

The fool is traditionally derived from the Morality plays as a means of entertaining the 'groundlings'. It may be conjectured that the
daily engagements of the lower classes with the basics of life render them worldly-wise, and the essences of life are not obstructed from their view by abstract ideologies. King Lear’s obsession with rhetorically heightened sycophancy blinds him to the true essence of a daughter’s love; it is the fool who sees through Lear’s foolishness and impractical project of dividing and distributing his kingdom.

The novel too is a genre that is so structured that unpopular and down-to-earth truths are foregrounded. Bakhtin traces the roots of the novel to the serious-comic and carnivalesque modes of popular culture. He assigns the subversive potentiality of the novel to its association with lower (class) identity and class resistance. The carnivalesque aspect of the novel is an antidote to the abstracted, disembodied concept of meaning that the Platonic philosophical tradition has formed. The novel resists the dominance of a single meaning and instead fosters heterogeneity.

Bakhtin’s theories have emerged from his understanding of the world as a place of incessant riot of colours that refuse to mingle and merge into the austere and uniform white. Like the rainbow it is at once diverse and coordinated. The spatial experience, the capacity of the
moment to hold all diversities that counts more than the promise of steady temporal progress, has been important to Bakhtin, and there is no compulsion to capture the moments in universal categories. Time holds immense possibilities; instead of attempting to capture and freeze time into absolute universalities, Bakhtin beholds it as a flowing river that, in its encounters with the resisting earth, creates its unique loops and bends. Bakhtin’s thoughts emerge out of the feelings that moved Whitman to write his ‘Song of Myself’. The movement of the poem frustrates any progression – it moves erratically in evocation of ecstasy and confession, in identification and recognition, in rapturous union with earth and spirit – it celebrates both personal and universal. To be precise, it is out of the humble sense of being a part of the human history, community and life-force that inspired Bakhtin, Narayan and many others. This recognition comes out tellingly in Whitman’s poem — ‘Song of Myself’:

I resist anything better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

(Whitman, W. 1973: 45)
WORKS CITED


