

Postcolonial Carnival: The Carnavalesque Subversion in Derek Walcott's Play *Pantomime*

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Abstract- This research article aims to explore Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime* from the carnivalesque mode of literary expression developed by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The paper argues that the grotesque 'carnavalesque' humor, satire, and parody in *Pantomime* provide a postcolonial framework for Caribbean creole authors like Walcott as a means of challenging and subverting (neo)colonial discourses. The tradition of Bakhtin's carnivalesque is drawn on the interpretation of Medieval European history and the works of author François Rabelais, however, tracing the history of carnival traditions in the Caribbean and Africa finds the carnivalesque decentered from its conventional Eurocentric origin story. As employed in *Pantomime*, the carnivalesque as a postcolonial mode of writing allows the mixed-race creole language, culture, and identity in the Caribbean to be reshaped and redefined. Further, the study explores the reimagining of hybrid creole language and identity from the philosophical perspective of Walcott's 'Adamic imagination'—longing for a return to an authentic, and sustainable way of life, free from the corrupting legacy of colonialism.

Index Terms- Carnavalesque, Postcolonialism, Caribbean, Bakhtin, Walcott.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin presents the theory of carnivalesque, which refers to the idea that literary authors may employ the mode of writing that uses the techniques of grotesque humor, satire, parody, and other methods as a form of resistance against the established dominant power structures. According to Bakhtin, the carnival represented a form of popular festive culture in medieval Europe that was characterized by grotesque carnivalesque behavior. According to *Rabelais and His World*, the medieval carnival culture greatly influenced literary works of its age, the literary mode of carnivalesque in which "...the grotesque is used to illustrate an abstract idea...precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better" (Bakhtin 62). Therefore, the carnival provided an approbated space for resistance and

subversion to the peasantry class—a topsy-turvy cathartic social space for the commoners; and as a literary mode, by the authors throughout centuries.

The sixteenth-century French Renaissance author François Rabelais was chiefly known for the grotesque carnival Geist of subversive satire and humor in his writings. Following the Rabelaisian literary tradition, the carnivalesque spirit is observed in the works of various authors throughout different literary eras, inasmuch as it became the Bakhtinian literary theory of carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the meaning of language is not absolute or fixed and is profoundly dependent on its spatiotemporal context—the Chronotope—the modal representation of space and time in works of literature. According to *The Dialogic Imagination*, "The spatial-temporal world of Rabelais was newly opened cosmos of the Renaissance...Man can and must conquer this entire spatial and temporal world" (Bakhtin 242). Therefore, Dialogism, the polyphony and multiplicity of perspectives in language, and Chronotope, the synchrony, and diachrony of narrative across space and time give meaning to the understanding of the carnivalesque texts.

In postcolonial writings, the carnivalesque is often employed as an authorial method to subvert and challenge the dominant ideologies and power structures of colonialism, challenging the oppressive political and cultural systems of colonial legacy. For the subaltern authors and readers, the carnivalesque is often employed and experienced as a satiric, ironic, and grotesque literary mode of resistance to reclaim their lost voices, allowing them to subvert colonial narratives and rewrite history from their perspective. In the context of postcolonial creolized and hybridized languages, writing back to empire in the carnivalesque mode creates a "...disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal language situations and, by extension, of multivocal narratives" (Ashcroft 136). For Homi K. Bhabha, "...Bakhtin provides a knowledge of the transformation of social discourse while displacing the originating subject and the casual and continuist progress of discourse" (Bhabha 188). Therefore, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque counter-narrative mode is a formidable technique to challenge, resist, subvert, and disrupt the dominant colonial narratives.

This article explores Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime* through the Bakhtinian theoretical framework of the carnivalesque. The play carnivalizes the complexity of postcolonial Caribbean cultural identity by transposing the master-slave characterization between Harry Trewe and Jackson Philip. *Pantomime* sets itself on the Caribbean Island of Tobago, where creole Jackson Philip is a Trinidadian calypsonian and Harry Trewe an Englishman. In the historical context of Trinidad and Tobago, Liverpool states that "Carnival Day [in Trinidad] was the only time of the year when the lower classes were permitted to assemble in numbers behind masks and to make threatening gestures towards their overlords" (Liverpool 487). This paper reveals the carnivalesque literary elements of blasphemy, parody, revelry, and the grotesque in *Pantomime*.

II. DECENTERING THE EUROCENTRIC HISTORY OF CARNIVALESQUE

According to Bakhtin, the origin of the carnivalesque tradition essentially emanates from medieval European cultures, however, Liverpool states that the "...roots of Carnival lay in both Africa and France" (58). For him, Carnival is a universal anthropological ritual event and "not a social event exclusively given by Whites to allow Africans to play rebellious war games... Neither was it a unilateral creation of the white elites or the French" (51). Rico concurs with the decentered origins of carnivalesque: "...it is known that it [carnival] is a celebration related to pagan myths and rituals before the birth of Christianity" (323). Tracing the source of carnival in Mediterranean countries, he links "...the celebration of rites dealing with fertility from Ancient Greek culture" (323). Therefore, the idea of carnivalesque stands decolonized from its orthodox Eurocentric origin history, as "...leisure-time activities and masquerade traditions of the Africans and Europeans in their respective homelands" (Liverpool 57). Nevertheless, the colonial Euro-African cultural 'contact zones' hybridized carnivalesque rituals and traditions over centuries in the Caribbean, as the "elements of these [European] traditions were transmitted to Trinidad, they became transformed into new accultured forms with new meanings" (57). Thus, African and European carnival traditions, with their independent origin in history hybridized 'transculturation' in postcolonial societies, as in the case of Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean.

III. THE DOMINANT CARNIVALESQUE SUBVERSIONS IN PANTOMIME

The *Pantomime* - Act I promptly posits the subject of carnivalization; *Robinson Crusoe*, a classic of English literature by Daniel Defoe is to be performed on a 'Castaway Guest House' on the Island of Tobago, West Indies. Harry Trewe informs that "It's our Christmas Panto[m]ine, it's called: Robinson Crusoe" (Branch 130). Christianity being the dominant theme of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist

experiences a religious awakening on a deserted Island, turning to the bible for solace and guidance. Rescued from cannibals, Crusoe teaches black savage Friday "...the true Knowledge of Religion, and of Christian Doctrine, that he might know Jesus Christ." (Defoe 186). However, *Pantomime* carnivalizes the theme of Christianness, similar to what *Rabelais and His World* describe as "...*parodia sacra*, 'sacred parody'...party directly linked, as in the parodies of liturgies and prayers, with the 'feast of the fools' " (14)—play's satirical subversive imagery of Christian themes like crucifixion and resurrection. Inventing a language, Jackson's reply to Harry's "Jesus Christ!" is that "...Jesus Christ kamalogo! (meaning: Jesus is dead!)" (Branch 139). In a postcolonial context, satirizing Christianity is a way of writing back to the empire and challenging the colonial notion of Christianity being a universal religion.

Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque has a significant element of 'role reversal' between the king and the fool, the high and the low, the dominant and the marginalized—a spatial and temporal role inversion of the power structures. Characterized in *Rabelais and His World* as a "...reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the 'feast of the fools' " (81). Similarly, *Pantomime* carnivalizes a classic Western literary canon *Robinson Crusoe*, by reversing roles between master Crusoe and slave Friday, as "...one day things bound to go in reverse, With Crusoe the slave and Friday the boss" (Branch 140). Furthermore, Western philosophical traditions have been implicated in justifying colonial and imperial domination; *Pantomime* carnivalizes German philosopher Martin Heidegger, regarded as one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. Many of Heidegger's philosophical ideas were influenced by his affiliation with the Nazi Party. Heidegger, soon after "...formally joining the Nazi Party... [as Rector of the University of Freiburg]... introduced new leadership principle into university administration, bypassing or silencing democratic and representative collegial bodies" (Evans 420-421). As a member of the Nazi Party, "Heidegger was also happy to enforce the dismissal of Jews from the university staff" (421).

Heidegger is grotesquely ridiculed by a parrot in *Pantomime*, according to Jackson "...a old German called Herr Heinegger used to own this place...and macaw keep cracking: 'Heinegger, Heinegger,' he remembering the Nazi..." (Branch 133). The ambivalent identity of a mimicking creole mulatto parrot, coining a portmanteau of 'Heidegger + Nigger as Heinegger'—"...a complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized... it produces ambivalent subjects whose mimicry is never very far from mockery" (Ashcroft 13). Jackson wants to take the creole bird "out the cage at dawn ... blindfolding the bitch...lining him against the garden wall...and perforating his ass by the firing squad" (Branch 133). According to Homi. K. Bhabha, "Walcott's history

begins elsewhere. He leads us to the moment of undecidability or unconditionality that constitutes the ambivalence of modernity as it executes its critical judgments, or seeks justification for its social facts" (233). Derek Walcott, belonging to a mixed race of African, European, and West Indian ancestry, experienced a complex ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as a constitutive aspect of his Caribbean identity. Between the carnivalized Heidegger and Nigger—Jackson Philip and Harry Trewe—hybridized state of existence between the two races, cultures, and identities; struggling to find his place in the world.

The grotesque realism of the carnivalesque literary mode is achieved by employing rebellious language that involves the subversion of traditional social and cultural hierarchies. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states that "the importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque" (27). The use of grotesque imagery through language to characterize established Eurocentric archetypes depose the conventionally imposed colonial propriety over the ideas of morality and virtue. As "abuse exercises a direct influence on the language" (27), the grotesque, exaggerated, and distorted imagery of the carnivalesque language creates an alternative space for resistance and subversion. Bertrand notes that Defoe's Friday "...instantly recognizes the supremacy of Robinson as his rescuer...all the trappings of civilization with which Robinson surrounds himself, especially gun, clothes and religion reinforce his supremacy" (36). *Pantomime* subverts Defoe's colonial narrative of archetypal Crusoe of an adventurer and explorer with grotesque abusive imagery of the highest degree; Trewe says: "...Think I'm bent? That's such a corny interpretation of the Crusoe-Friday relationship, boy" (134)—bizarre coitus imagery of Defoe's puritan Crusoe and black slave Friday. Introduction to *Rabelais and His World* states that the "...grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh... laughter degrades and materializes" (20).

Aladdin and the Magic Lamp, a famous tale from the *Arabian Nights* has been adapted and retold by the West through various mediums, as observed by Said that "In [Western] films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty...sadistic, treacherous low" (286). A power dynamic that creates a unilateral interpretation of the Eastern world by the West, constituting an epistemological knowledge structure based on exoticized and othered orient. *Pantomime* carnivalizes the story of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* grotesquely by retitling it as *Aladdin and his Wonderful Vamp*; a show in which Harry Trewe performed as a 'dame' before the ground crew of RAF (Royal Air Force), dressed as a vamp—a seductive woman who exploits men by using their sexual desire for her. In *Rabelais and His World*, this carnivalesque feature is manifested in "...participants' apparel. [in which] Men are transvested as women and vice versa" (441). A show that Trewe performed dressing as a woman, in which "...a big sergeant...kept pinching [his]

arse...and [he kept] blushing and pretending to be liking it" (Branch 136). The story of oriental Aladdin, a colonized subject who can only become wealthy by using a magic lamp, a colonial fiction that reinforces gender stereotypes, where the women always need to be rescued by men—de-centered by the grotesque realism of *Pantomime*—postcolonial carnivalesque mode of writing to destabilize colonial narratives.

IV. PANTOMIME: AN INTERIOR CARNIVALESQUE OF HYBRID IDENTITY

The colonial classification, hierarchy, and distinction of race/identity is dichotomized on binary opposites— "...a binary distinction between 'civilized' and 'primitive'..." (Ashcroft 218); However, the mixing of different racial and ethnic groups in the Caribbean has historically created a distinct cultural post-colonial landscape, with an amalgamation of homogenized languages, religions, and traditions. Walcott's mixed race belongs to African, English, and Dutch ancestry, him being a hybrid mulatto with, his "...generation had looked at life with black skins and blue eyes..." (Walcott 9). The existential complexity of post-colonial Caribbean mixed-race identity for Walcott is that "they will become hermits or rogue animals, increasingly exotic hybrids, broken bridged between two ancestries, Europe and the Third World of Africa and Asia; in other words, they will become Islands" (56). Bhabha concurs as he sees "...the claim to hierarchical 'purity' of cultures untenable" (Ashcroft 136). In *Pantomime*, the black-white, Afro-European relation between Jackson and Trewe is constructed as a narrative of hybridized ambivalence; as Jackson says: "...so in desperation, he [Trewe] turns to me and said: 'Mr. Phillip' is the two o' we, / one classical actor and one Creole, / let we act together with we heart and soul" (Branch 161). Therefore, as all the ancestral legacies of the fragmented pasts are manifested in Walcott's identity, *Pantomime* can be interpreted as an interior carnivalesque of Walcott's hybrid identity.

V. CARNIVALESQUE AS CANONICAL COUNTER-DISOURSE

Robinson Crusoe is widely considered a canonical text in Western literary tradition due to its influence on the development of the novel as a genre; however, its canonical status has also been the subject of criticism due to its problematic portrayal of colonizer-colonized stereotypes. Ostensibly, a story of adventure, travel, and exploration; however, in practice, producing and maintaining the colonial narrative of "...once 'explored' and so 'known'... cataloged as under the control or influence of one or other of the colonizing power" (Ashcroft 113). In fiction, Crusoe represents the triumph of the human spirit, resilience, and self-reliance; however, sifting through colonial history, Crusoe fictionalizes "Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean in 1492...a period of genocide and enslavement of the native Amerindian

people” (238). Crusoe and Columbus, were both explorers, colonizers, encounterers of native people, and representatives of European Imperialism. Walcott’s *Pantomime* thus subverts *Robinson Crusoe* and Defoe’s ‘canonical’ imperial narrative with a carnivalesque ‘counter-narrative’, which Ashcroft describes as “...the subversion of canonical texts and their inevitable reinscription in this process of subversion” (68). As Jackson proclaims:

This moment that we are now acting here is the history of imperialism; it's nothing less than that. And I don't think that I can—should—concede my getting into a part halfway and abandoning things, just because you, as my superior, give me orders. People become independent. Now, I could go down to that beach by myself with this hat, and I could play Robinson Crusoe, I could play Columbus, I could play Sir Francis Drake, I could play anybody discovering anywhere, but I don't want you to tell me when and where to draw the line! Or what to discover and when to discover it. All right? (143)

VI. CREOLE AS THE CARNIVALESQUE OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

Imposing imperial language over dominion subjects remained a tool of colonial domination for suppressing and subduing indigenous people and their cultures. For asserting colonial control over the inhabitants and their territories, the colonizers ‘named’ those foreign lands either on the basis of their physical characteristics or based on classic mythological figures, altogether erasing the existing indigenous names and cultures. According to Ashcroft, “...the dynamic of naming becomes a primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines and captures the place in language...to name a place is to announce discursive control over it” (201). Similarly, Defoe’s canonical castaway incognizant protagonist Crusoe started naming his surroundings upon arrival; the land as “...dismal unfortunate Island, which I call’d the Island of Despair” (Defoe 60), the native as: “...I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his name should be Friday” (174). Comparably, the name Caribbean is “...from a corruption of the Spanish [word] caribal...‘West Indies’ arose in contrast to the designation ‘East Indies’, the ‘spice islands’ of Asia and Columbus’ intended destination when he ‘discovered’ the Caribbean in 1492” (Ashcroft 39). That being the case, the carnivalization of language is to subvert the colonial history of inscription—an endeavor to regain control over language—a reclamation of language from the forces of colonization.

Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque describes the role of language as a cultural expression to subvert established norms and hierarchies. On language, *Rabelais and His World* note that “...every age has its own type of words and

expressions that are given as signals to speak freely, to call things by their own names, without any mental restrictions or euphemisms”—creating a carnivalistic “...atmosphere of frankness”—generating a space for “...an unofficial view of the world” (188). In *Pantomime*, for Jackson, “...Language is ideas” (133). Therefore, it is possible to create a carnivalesque atmosphere by inventing language; creating new words and linguistic forms to challenge prescribed colonial language and power structures. In the Caribbean, creolization is the blending of different languages in new unexpected ways. In *Pantomime*, Jackson invents a new language “Amaka nobo sakamaka khaki pants kamaluma Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ kamalogo...Kamalongo kaba!”. Jackson says: Jesus is dead, to which Trewe replies: “Sure” (139). Walcott uses the carnivalesque of blasphemy to challenge the colonial religious structural narrative i.e., of Christendom; for example, in his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the protagonist Makak sees Jesus Christ as a black man in his vision. Blasphemy of carnivalesque, not exclusive to Walcott, has historically been an element of Caribbean Carnival as a platform for the subversive reimagining of Christian figures such as Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary as black creole. As Liverpool states that “...The social spaces of Africans, like Bakhtin’s marketplace, encouraged forms of discourse such as parody, ridicule, blasphemy, and revelry that Whites either sought to abolish, mend or otherwise control” (174). The relationship between language, blasphemy, and postcolonial carnivalesque is complex and multifaceted; nevertheless, it is a method of resisting colonialism and its authoritative agency over native cultures and languages.

VII. CARIBBEAN CARNIVALESQUE: DEATH OF THE OLD, BIRTH OF THE NEW

In the context of post-colonial Caribbean identity, the literary mode of carnivalesque is a method of representing the death of the old colonial order and the birth of a new cultural identity. In the words of Walcott, describing the elements of the Old World, “...Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban...they [all] reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man” (40). The postcolonial carnivalesque aims to create new categories of epistemology for the emancipated, a new epistemological system of language, identity, and culture—rejecting all Eurocentric Western epistemologies that are often based on binary knowledge categories of ‘rational vs irrational’. For Walcott, the “...vision of man in the New World is Adamic” (37), a vision in which everything must be named, imagined, and categorized again, like biblical Adam, “we would walk, like new Adams, in a nourishing ignorance which would name plants and people with a child’s belief that the world is its own age” (6). The Adamic vision that *Pantomime* describes when Trewe asks Jackson: “You never called anything by the same name twice. What’s a table?” (139). Jackson forgets and remembers again, “That’s a

breakfast table. Ogoushi. That's a dressing table. Amanga Ogoushi. I remember now" (139)—*Pantomime*, as a postcolonial carnivalesque reverses the language roles in which the representative of colonialism Trewe becomes a subject of confusion of language comprehension; whereas, Jackson reclaims the power of language by naming things, drawing parallels to the biblical story of Adam and the creation of language—Walcott's philosophy of 'Adamic Imagination'—a reimagining of identity as an answer to the complexities of historically hybridized creole Caribbean identity during colonialism.

VIII. CARIBBEAN THEATER AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

The history of Theatrical tradition in the Caribbean spans several centuries, with the earliest record of performances in Trinidad and Tobago brought by colonial Spaniards in the 16th century; however, as the British colonial authorities introduced European theater forms during the 19th Century, a new generation of Trinidadian playwrights emerged during the early 20th century, including Alfred Mendes, Eric Walcott, and CLR James. During the 1930s, Trinidadian Theater Workshop was founded, led by Derek Walcott and his brother Roderick, it produced plays that explored the issues of Trinidadian and Tobagonian race, identity, and culture. During the 1950s and 60s, these new theatrical forms and styles were influenced by regional carnivalesque traditions, such as calypso and carnival theater. Ricoh mentions Derek Walcott and "...the use of carnivalesque elements in his plays" (327), situating carnivalesque tradition in the postcolonial context, observing that the "...Carnival shares a common background all over the Caribbean, consisting of the contact between enslaved Africans and European colonizers" (324). Moreover, according to Liverpool, from 1900 until the United Kingdom granted independence to Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, "...many members of the lower classes used their masquerades and calypsoes to subvert the administrative principles and values of the Government and elite...", intending to "...resist the elite's attempts to take over the Carnival" (409). Historically, Trinidadian carnival tradition in the early 20th century had the element of subverting and satirizing Christianity, as Walcott does in his theatrical play *Pantomime*: "Kamalongo Kaba!...Jesus is dead" (139). Liverpool mentions that "As 'Devils', for example, they [Trinidadians] mocked Christian teachings, and collected money from onlookers since the Christian Church...collected money all through the year from the faithful" (409). Therefore, the Trinidadian and Tobagonian theatrical defiance through the mode of carnivalesque is historically traced back to Carnival traditions in the Caribbean, with plays like *Pantomime* being a powerful form of postcolonial resistance in the Caribbean, the mode draws on the region's hybrid cultural heritage that employs the medium of theater to challenge colonial and neocolonial oppression, preserving and

asserting the native agency of all marginalized groups.

IX. CONCLUSION

Pantomime adopts Bakhtin's literary mode of carnivalesque to subvert and satirize Defoe's canon *Robinson Crusoe*, a Eurocentric novel that perpetuates colonialist ideologies that reinforces Western hegemony. Historically, the origins of carnival and carnivalesque rituals can be independently traced back to both the African and European traditions, therefore this study finds the 'carnivalesque' decentered from its Eurocentric Medieval origin story. As employed in *Pantomime*, creole is observed as a form of carnivalesque language because it abrogates the prescribed colonial linguistic norms, creating a space for resistance and subversion. In *Pantomime*, Walcott's philosophy of 'Adamic Imagination' presents a desire of returning to an intuitive, simpler, more authentic Caribbean life, free of corrupted colonial identity, history, and cultural heritage in the Caribbean.

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