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GRAFFITI: The celebration of Grotesque

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ABSTRACT

Graffiti is everywhere around us – whether it be on the walls of public places, private rooms, or on t-shirts - as means of expression of the 'self' or, as containing political signification. Knowingly or unknowingly, it has entered our daily life, at times, in the form of a cultural commodity, or an artefact. But there remains an element of resistance or negation, which favours the subversion of legal, political and ideological dominance. Here Graffiti, both as a sub-cultural space and aesthetic experiment, develops close affinity with Bakhtin's idea of carnival. A tradition which dwindled in Europe, even after its disappearance from the public domain, and its present metamorphosed form which can be seen in different literary and art forms, carnival witnessed the uncontrollable outburst of the unconscious psyche of human thought unstrained by social regulations. It represented a temporary suspension of life enjoyed by the masses- "the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance". Being a 'space under culture', graffiti fights against all the spurious morals of the high culture and, the very idea of 'perfection' is deconstructed. This paper attempts to look at how graffiti becomes a 'carnival'. Here, thrust would be laid on the grotesque elements inscribed in this new art form, graffiti. Keywords: Carnival, subculture, graffiti, resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

For Mikhail Bakhtin, the literary theorist and philosopher, carnivalesque is both the description of a historical event and a literary tendency. He was greatly influenced by the carnivals of medieval Europe, which prepared favourable ground for the subversion of political, legal and ideological authority. During medieval carnivals, official ceremonies and rituals undertook a comic aspect "as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals" (Bakhtin, 4). According to Bakhtin carnivals "offered a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin, 7). It can be best defined as period of anarchy and liberation. Though the critics like Terry Eagleton had called carnivals as "an authorized

transgressions", its true liberating power can be seen as facilitating innovation of new ideas. Bakhtin goes so far as to suggest that the European renaissance itself was made possible by the spirit of free thinking and impiety that the carnivals engendered. He believed that tradition of carnival dwindled in Europe, even after its disappearance from the public domain, and its final metamorphosed form can be seen in different literary and art forms.

Carnival provided a temporary public space for people, where they could overtly expose anything irrespective of hierarchical differences, which was unacceptable to the mainstream society. In other words, carnival witnessed the uncontrollable outburst of the unconscious psyche

of human thought unstrained by social regulations. It is a temporary suspension of life enjoyed by the masses- "the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance" (Bakhtin, 9). Being a counter-hegemonic practice, carnivals provided a social platform for all men to mock the conventional practices without any constraints.

ANALYSIS

In this sense, Graffiti can be seen as carnivalesque. It can be perceived as a "space under culture" (Miller, 2) which provides an influential medium for the socially disadvantaged communities to built and assert their identity. It is an accurate indicator of the social attitudes of a community. It is a revolt against the existing high culture and all other canonical traditions that have tried to confine expression within its bound. In this sense, Graffiti can be perceived as a deviant subculture representing a "symbolic form of resistance" [Hebdige, 80]. According to Richard Lachmann, subcultures have exercised deviant and subversive strategies to combat the mainstream ideology and aesthetics.

"The members of subculture challenge hegemony by drawing on the particular experiences and customs of their communities, ethnic groups, and age cohorts, thereby demonstrating that social life can be constructed in ways different from the dominant conceptions of reality" [Lachmann, 238].

But unlike carnivals, this space is not short lived. It manifests a series of protest and resistance, which is favoured by its anonymity.

Theories on ideology and hegemony had stressed the role of "(repressive) state apparatus" [Althusser, 146] in constructing the subjectivities of the subordinate and the common sense of the society in their own interest. By manipulating the ideological state apparatus, the state maintains its power and dominance. The people are made to believe that they are choosing, but actually they are not (in other words they are left without any choice). Here, we find the subway graffitiists challenging the very notion of "making choice". The graffitiists completely subvert the mainstream

aesthetic sense, thereby challenging the ideological state apparatus. Here the ideological state apparatus fails in moulding the attitudes and morality of a few people. Then it becomes the responsibility of repressive structure to act. The subway graffitiists are often portrayed with sinister images and are tagged as antisocial, and the state spares no opportunity to fine them with huge amount, thereby enforcing the function of ideological state apparatus. Subway graffitiists overtly challenge this very repressive structure, which had both consciously and unconsciously tried to control the public sensibility.

The capitalistic society operates by its economic base. "But this economic power is both underpinned and exceeded by semiotic power" [Fiske, 10], that is the power to make meanings. Semiotic resistance had remained indeed as a significant tool in the hands of graffitiist. Each graffitiist is engaged in building his/her own individual identity, thereby contributing to individual and ethnic meaning. T-shirts with inscriptions highlighting words expressing the individual and communal feelings had essentially incorporated the essence of the graffiti subculture. They had emerged as a vital tool of resistance among the youth thereby engaging in a struggle against the prevailing system. Carnavalesque discourses breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest (Kristeva, 65). Recently the Los Angeles based reporter, Jason Leopard, appeared in a t-shirt which read out "Sick of it all". He is presently getting ready to try on the US government.

In carnival, we find the degradation and debasement of the higher favouring the exposure of the covert parts of the body. "The upper body is the face or the head and the lower body is the genital organs, the belly and the buttocks" [Bakhtin, 24]. Here one become concerned with the "lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs, it therefore relates to the arts of defecation, conception, Pregnancy and birth" [Bakhtin, 24]. These grotesque images completely shatter the very concept of our social reality. It laughs at the very idea of perfection and remains hostile towards all that is immortalised. We have

"latrinalia" [graffiti found in toilets] which exhibits both verbally and pictorially grotesque images of body. These often portrayed images of defecation, urination, and genital organs inviting harsh criticism from the mainstream society, thereby causing a great blow to conventional aestheticism. When a society remains in a state of flux and proscriptions on a particular sentiment mount up in a society, the public manifests a tendency to express that particular sentiment. Latrinalia is nothing but the manifestation of such a sentiment.

The language of the common man often remained marginalised and colloquialism is considered as inferior, though recently there is a different trend emerging. The conventional society demands the "language of power", which standardizes the whole literary canon and subsequent disciplines. Often this language reflects the interest of the middle class bourgeois who prefers highly polished language, thereby promoting a false notion of culture built upon spurious morals and on the idea of "perfection". The verbal composition of graffiti completely subverts this concept of the structure of language.

There is a tendency to break away from the clinical, polished language. This idea can be conceptualised at two distinct levels depending upon the nature of Graffiti. On one hand, we have private graffiti, usually found on the walls of toilets, bus-stops, and other public spaces, which can be seen as one's outlet of those emotions that has been proscribed by the society. On the other hand, public graffiti is created with an intended audience and special motives. They can be politically targeted at a specific individual or can be used as a powerful tool against the entire body in power. Sometimes we find them completely getting "isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb" [Bakhtin, 16]. Here they come to be regarded as special genre of billingsgate. The language becomes highly abusive comprising of insulting words and expressions.



CONCLUSION

Graffiti remains a staunch critique of the society which is driven by false morals and ideals. The anonymous nature of these graffiti has enabled them to retain their carnival nature, thereby completely shattering our conceptual framework. The whole realm of language and literature is re-structured as there is the subversion of the dominant culture. But unlike carnival, graffiti is not short-lived.

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