

Bakhtin's Carnavalesque-Grotesque Realism and the Voice of Other in Sylvia Plath's 'Metaphors'

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Societies are shaped by voices, but the voices of those in position of power have been the loudest, the most deafening. Undoubtedly, therefore, there have always been voices in societies, specially feminine ones, which have not been allowed on the grounds of being either taboos or against the norms, conventions, and even the laws of a society. Nevertheless, there have been loopholes for these voices to escape and be echoed innocuously. As an instance, Bakhtin believed that carnivals gave people the chance to mock and criticize authorities without falling prey to its otherwise oppressive consequences. Literature, too, tends to have such escape clauses which Bakhtin introduced as carnivalesque-grotesque realism. Like carnivals, he believed, this literary technique aims to distort images of idealism that are internalized in societies. Through these satirical descriptions, a literary text can display or play a carnival, mock the taboo, and cunningly escape its consequences. In so doing, the artist fabricates an opportunity for a prison break from monologue to make a space for dialogic criticism so that the voice of the other could be heard. Such literary escape-artists abound in the realm of literature all around the world and the course of history. Sylvia Plath, the American poet, is one such artist.

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The present study examines Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque-grotesque realism in Sylvia Plath's poem "Metaphors" and shows how this technique can divert the reader from the socially constructed idealism (of motherhood) and provide a different view and expression of reality (as the real experience of pregnancy from a woman's viewpoint). Pregnancy as a path to the glorified position of motherhood has long been overromanticized; a mother who does not fit in this romantic illusion is demonized as the bad mother. However, the idolized and idealized mother icon is far from reality and Plath has aimed to work as an iconoclast. That she may achieve this aim, Plath applies metaphors and grotesque imagery coupled with realism. Using these grotesque images and placing them in a carnivalesque atmosphere, Plath is to degrade the ideal image of a pregnant mother. In so doing, the reader is given the chance to hear the voice of the pregnant mother as the other. Plath's different humorous expression creates a carnivalesque atmosphere in which objects and creatures revolve around the concept of pregnancy and the pregnant mother's body. It also degrades the image of 'ideal pregnancy', and replaces it with the reality of what the pregnant mother experiences. This degradation of the so called ideal is significant since it is through such attitude that Plath manages to defamiliarize this icon and reveals its true colors as an object. This, she does through grotesque imagery which does not celebrate pregnancy as a divine state, but rather degrades it as a socially constructed idealism that objectifies a woman, reducing her to a carrier. The woman, as she describes, is manipulated like an elephant for its ivory, a cow, or a house; she carries life but she wonders if she can have a life of her own. She becomes a metaphor, a riddle, a question.

Besides, Plath builds her poem word by word upon the feminine discourse and fights with those patriarchal values while mocking them. The poet describes briefly, yet strongly, the way the new role – motherhood – is prioritized over womanhood and personhood of the woman. Plath depicts the woman's feelings in her new role which seems to amputate the woman's hands of the opportunities she may otherwise have, crushes her spirit, and even suffocates her voice so that she will not be able to give voice to her experiences as she truly experiences. She illustrates how the female body is reduced to a carrier in the interest of the utilitarian values of a patriarchal society which denies the woman's right to make choices. Nevertheless, she neither chooses to accept the dominant ideologies regarding pregnancy, nor does she choose to terminate it. In other words, although she has chosen the path of motherhood, she refuses to describe it as a path of roses.

To show how materialistically the woman's body has been utilized in the interest of patriarchy, the poem is so written as to primarily depict a new version of reality regarding pregnancy, this time more feminine, more realistic, and less idealistic; this time from a feminine point of view and through feminine discourse. It is the voice of the other – the real woman's experience of pregnancy against the chorus of patriarchal values. Yet, there is more to this metaphor than the role of the pregnant mother. This metaphor of pregnancy goes beyond childbearing. The woman Plath depicts is Eve, carrying the burden of original sin. The woman has been objectified and dehumanized when not only her body, but also her life choices are exploited in favor of patriarchy.

In summary, the poem is a grotesque reminder of the gender-defined roles internalized in patriarchal societies. These roles, which are idealized and romanticized, are steps away from the reality. Yet, those who are given the roles experience a sense of identity crisis/riddle, are not able to define their roles, and suffer in silence since such things are tabooed. Yet, a voice, a female voice is needed to speak this feminine experience from a feminist view point. The play with such a fire of taboo, even in carnivalesque costume, is a reminder of the bravery of Plath's voice. This essay, through the carnivalesque-grotesque realism that Plath uses as a defensive technique against the dominant and idealistic language, demonstrates how much feminine writing can enrich human experience and perception of realities. Language can serve purposes, either the patriarchal purposes that bound the individual, or the individual's purposes that stand against the patriarchy. It is, therefore, the woman who should find her voice and her say in existence or attributes of the roles she assumes.

Key words: Carnavalesque-Grotesque Realism, Degradation, Voice of The Other, Pregnancy, Woman's Body, Carrier.