

The grotesque body in Indian comic tradition

An aesthetics of transgression

by **Rajni Mujral**

Bharata, Indian theatrologist, who wrote the foundational text on performance, *Nāṭyashāstra* (500 CE), identifies *hāsya*, (the comic), as emerging from *srngāra* (love) in a low-mimetic mode.¹ He identifies deformed body as one of the *vibhāvas* (the cause) of *hāsya*. Bakhtin, too locates the source of transgression and renewal in the grotesque body. The significant question is of the necessity of returning to a text from 14th century. It is an endeavour to re-trace the tradition; re-turning to a tradition of transgressive laughter.² *Prahasana*, a genre from Sanskrit tradition³ which can be translated as farce, is such a genre with transgressive potential; it transgresses the prevalent hierarchical structures through presenting the image of the laughing body. This kind of gesture is akin to the dynamics of postcolonial aesthetics: transgressing and thereby transfiguring. The aim is to locate the transgressive zone that transforms and transfigures various strictures *in* and *through* the physiological. The zone is of the corporeal grotesque. Therefore, the need to bring these traditions in contact, to provide a better understanding of the tradition of grotesque in relation to in the genre of *prahasana*.

The basic proposition the paper wishes to put forward is this: each culture has its own cultural forms and variants to express resistance. Thus, it is interesting to explore and observe the recurrent use of body as a trope to express resistance, across different traditions. On the one hand, Bharata theorized the role of body in debunking the oppressive structures. On the other, Bakhtin too emphasizes on the role of body in his elaboration of the notion of carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the laughing body became a metaphor for resistance and rejuvenation. Bharata identified body, especially deformed, disfigured, non-conforming body as one of the various sources of laugh-

ter, of the low-mimetic with subversive potential. Body through its nature of becomingness, disrupts the strictures that make it a cultural artifact. It resists fixity, and through laughter and through its disfiguration debunks the strictures that layer the oppressive normative frame over the body, affecting it into a cultural artifact. The comic here emerges in the arena of the physiological and the body becomes a mode to embody the feeling of “rapture” in Nietzschean sense. It is pertinent to look at bodily desire here and how desire pushes the body to the state of rapture, thereby ensuing comic and grotesque in the process. The attempt here is to bring two traditions together to look at the notion of grotesque and the role body plays in its figuration.

Hāsa and prahasana: The power of laughter

In *Nāṭyasāstra*, Bharata identifies the origin of *hāsya* (the comic) in the imitation of *srngāra* (love): according to him, the comic is for love just like the pathetic is to valor. He draws an analogy between them and identifies how they come out as imitations of the bodily emotions of a higher order. Body is central for the discourse of *Nāṭyasāstra*. It is the body that enacts (*abhinaya*) and elicits emotions (*rasa*, the aesthetic savour) as well. Thus the comic emerges as a bodily manifestation in imitation of love in a low-mimetic mode. In his commentary on *Nāṭyasāstra*,

Abhinavagupta in the 10th century elaborates it further, arguing that imitations of other emotions are capable of eliciting the comic as well. Thus he acknowledges the power of laughter, *hāsa*, and the scope of the comic, *hāsya*. *Prahasana* is a genre for which *hāsa* is central: etymologically *prahasana* is derived from the root *hāsa*, laughter. The Dionysiac spirit is the spirit of the comic.

abstract

The paper examines the comic in relation to the figuration of the grotesque body in Sanskrit tradition in India. It is pursued with two objectives: firstly, to explore bodily figurations in the Indian comic tradition, and, further, to enquire the parallel elaboration of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque that celebrates the laughing body. A reading of a 14th century Indian text *Hāsyāmava* provides the ground for the elucidation. The paper elaborates on how the “distorted, deformed and diseased” body which Bharata refers to, the “grotesque body”⁴ as Bakhtin says, institutes *hāsya* and carnivalesque discursively. The bodily desire pursued is pushed to the limits, resulting in rapture through a transgressive act.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtin, carnival, *prahasana*.

Without going much into the analysis of symbolism, yet recognizing its function in the symbolic realm, it is significant to notice that *prahasana*, as a comic genre, is a genre that personifies the transgressive function. Transgression⁴ is at the very core of the genre, the transgression of hierarchical order founded on pure/impure binaries among others. The genre is a re-enactment of transgressive function in the symbolic mode, an act and an enactment that effects carnivalesque which otherwise is not possible outside that symbolism. It emerges in a society that constitutes itself in terms of a series of negations— in the form of taboos, social, religious and symbolic prohibitions. Further, these taboos form the order due to their binding force. This is the source of the genre's vitality. Reversal of order is the first phase of this genre, smoothly followed by the violation of negation and its celebration as an opening up of possibilities. This reversal is exactly what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy: what exists outside this frame gets suspended within it. By its very structure, the comic is closely linked to transgression, and its axis is from sacred to profane. It is in this movement, that reversal takes place, and this reversal which at one level is incongruity, is the source of comic. To return to Bharata after Abhinavagupta, when *sringāra* is mimicked, it no longer remains in the realm of the sacred, but slips into the profane, the slip being inbuilt into the act of mimicking itself (which Homi Bhabha studies in a different context⁵), it gives rise to *hāsya* or *hāsyabhāsa*: the comic or the semblance of the comic. It gains more potential for transgression when this suffix of *abhāsa* is attached to it, since always it can distinguish itself from the real, although it is an effect of and in a way constitutes, the real. This fictionality is a crucial element since *prahasana* always (re)presents a *staged* event.

ITS TRANSGRESSIVE potential is evident among other aspects:⁶ in laughter being put within the shackles. The classical manual of performance stipulates that only base characters can laugh out loud, while the higher ones can only smile.⁷ Hence what Bakhtin identifies as a loud festive laughter (*smekh*)⁸ is in itself a transgression since it is a violation of taboos. Further, it can be noted that what Bakhtin identifies as carnivalistic laughter is fundamentally a destabilizing force. He argues that “Carnivalistic laughter... is directed toward something higher- toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, with *crisis* itself”.⁹

Not only the transgressive, but the comic is also a point of convergence of all the *rasas* (the aesthetic savours), according to Abhinavagupta. As he affirms in the *Abhinavabhāratī*, all the *rasas* are components of *hāsya*— a meeting point, a melting point as it were, an instance of carnivalesque. F. M. Cornford arrives at a similar conclusion by a different trajectory: in his study “The Ritual Origins of Comedy”, locating the origin of the comedy in connection with Dionysian ritual, he associates

comedy with a sense of victory over everything inimical to human beings. He relates it to laughter tracing its two ramifications whereby he links it with ridicule on the one hand, and on the other, with positive spirit. In this second sense, he says that the subversive spirit of carnival is passed off as “celebration of life”.¹⁰

Though other emotions do evoke laughter, laughter when evoked by the comic mood revives and rejuvenates. It is what Bakhtin calls as “festive laughter”,¹¹ the *hāsa* which is at the heart of *prahasana*. Since laughter revives and rejuvenates, it becomes indispensable to carnival. Further, carnivalesque subversion is carried over in the garb of laughter, a garb that body wears.

Laughing body and the question of subjectivity

Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque originates from popular culture, from a public event. It is a structure within a structure: larger structure being the hierarchical order and carnival creates a new structure that renegotiates and reverses its own basis. The scope of such an eventfulness might not be radical in nature, however, by positioning itself on the borderline, it reveals scope for a new structure, not by a complete overthrow of what was already there, but by a reversal of the existing order. The reversal occurs by employing and making use of the existing parameters, *tacitly*. Its positioning itself is subversive; denying any binary logic, it is rather suggestive of a spectrum where the nature of the event is to be taken into consideration over a continuum. Its refusal to be part of a category through its positioning at the borderline could depict its potential as radical yet its partaking in the hierarchical structure becomes an overt depiction of its rare possibility of any radical overthrow. However, it may be limited temporally, it gives a scope for renegotiation. I am hereby arguing that it can be located in the space of the in-between. The laughing body is the body in the in-between space that redefines the boundaries by destabilizing the structures.

“Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body as the basis of carnival imagery”¹² underlines his insistence on body for the festive laughter. It is the body that laughs and after laughter, rejuvenates. Though the comedy has been culture-specific, the grotesque body, termed variously as incongruent, distorted etc.,¹³ has remained as an inevitable source of the comic. As Bakhtin says, “Th[e] boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation”.¹⁴

How is it that the genre of *prahasana* effects what characterizes the carnivalesque? One of the ways is to see transgression as the basis of carnivalesque, but transgression alone is not enough. *Hāsya/hāsa* (the comic/the laughter) is integral to it for its renewal; essential to destroy and to revive. The genre is transgressive in terms of its themes, in its engagement with the various taboos— for instance, those of sacredness and sexuality. It challenges the hierarchical structures

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in a playful manner, questioning the established boundaries and brings revival through comic effect. The comic effect produced thus strikes a hopeful note, opening a possibility for change, for transformation. The society is constituted by negations, and the positive spirit of laughter and the carnivalesque moves into the negated trajectory. The space no longer remains the exclusive domain of the official and is no longer fixed. This movement of transgressing and bringing the taboo into the social, problematizes both the categories and such process of categorization. The result is topsy-turvy-ness. The grotesque here is the resultant factor: the outcome of an attempt to transgress the rigid and dominant social strictures. The body becomes a significant trope to bring out the grotesqueness. The nature of the human body is opposite to the inflexible strictures. A significant amount of attention is, therefore, paid to controlling the human body, to controlling human actions, to establishing a particular kind of bodily behavior; any digression from that behavior is termed taboo. Bakhtin stresses on the open and flexible nature of the human body.¹⁵ One way to oppose the authoritative forces is to bring the flexible open nature of the body in force. Body here becomes a significant metaphor through its unfinalized disposition, thus laughs and thereby reappropriates the prevalent structures and thus redefines itself. Hence, laughter transgresses and transforms the existing parameters. The driving force behind the grotesque too is inherent in human nature, or rather the human body. Further, grotesque is one of the effects of moving into the unfamiliar territory—a territory beyond the socially constructed bodily consciousness.¹⁶ The *Samkhya* tradition, the enumerationist school of Indian philosophical thought, has a similar conception of the composition of the human body: it identifies the transformation of five different elements resulting in the *prakṛti* or *pradhana* the “dynamic psycho-physical material substance”. The body which is made of these five elements is not a static entity. These elements are in a constant process of transformation and that is how the human body is produced.¹⁷ The inherent nature of the human body is dynamism and continuity. Bakhtin too emphasizes the dynamic nature of the body. For him, it always is in the act of becoming.¹⁸ The strictures constantly try to turn it into a static object. The laughing body which is at the center of Bakhtin’s study is dynamic; it transgresses and moves beyond the straitjacketing of cultural norms and laughs and opens up. It is in a constant process of taking the world in, through the bodily acts of inhaling, eating and defecating. The body becomes part of the cosmos and viceversa. The Ayurvedic tradition describes bodily nature same as the material universe because of the five great elements. The body is an extension or part of the cosmos. And it has the same renewing nature as the universe.¹⁹

Social strictures negate the ambivalent nature of the body and present it as a harmonized and homogenous entity. But, the body is a heterogeneous entity: various elements co-exist and transform each other under the fleshly garb. This ambivalent and heterogeneous nature

of the body is what gives it a dynamic status and creates a space for the grotesque: it is a subjective²⁰ position, not the object of actions; rather, the actions proceed from here. Laughter is a way of asserting its essential subjective condition.

How these issues of subjectivity and reappropriation come forth in the comic tradition of *prahasana* can be further elucidated by looking at the text of *Hāsyārṇava*, a Sanskrit *prahasana* from the 14th century.

Hāsyārṇava: In the world of grotesquerie

Hāsyārṇava begins by invoking Lord Siva and Parvati as if it is following the convention. The play between the sacred and profane starts here, setting the stage for the consequent emergence of the carnivalesque: the benediction sets the tone of the play – of the presence of the erotic and comic elements in the *prahasana*, of the inversion of the power structures and the appeal to the physiological:

The thick mixture of sandal paste washed down by the
flow of sweat
from fatigue at the embrace of vine-like arms,
the words of love broken by heaving sighs,
the lips bitten in love dalliance,
the eyes revealing the delight²¹

This complex of images codifies the pathway of transgression through the carnivalesque which explains the formulation that the article brings forth: the initial erasure of the boundaries of sacred and profane and their reversal,²² an intervention of desire, its pursuit, the transgression and the final state of rapture. This forms the frame for the subsequent narrative.

King Anayasindhu (“Ocean of Misrule”) organizes a meeting in a brothel to discuss the matters of the kingdom he rules.²³ The guard had informed the king that the people in the state have been following the laws. At the family level, husbands are being faithful to their wives. There have been no instances of theft either. The king expresses his concern at this situation and arranges a meeting in the brothel with his advisors. The setting of the meeting in the brothel sets the stage for the topsy-turvy-ness that characterizes the *prahasana* and evokes laughter. It presents the situation during the festive spring-time or the time when the power structures have been unsettled. The situation gives a glimpse of a carnival world where everything is turned upside down. The dress, the ornaments, and other rituals are reversed and given an entirely different role.²⁴

The visit to the brothel is described in terms of a pilgrimage. Upon entering the brothel, the king says that he has obtained the merits of a hundred pilgrimages.²⁵ There is an implied pun on the ritual of going to different temples. It is a forced move from sacred to profane; for the king, indulgence in the bodily pleasures is the primary con-

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cern. The *prahasana* states that, instead of going to various temples for seeking god or virtue, he seeks worldly delights. Further more, in the description of a woman's body as a pond, every sacred ritual is brought down to the level of the physiological. The element of eros latent in zealous devotion is made manifest here. It is a different realm parallel to the sacred one. This also is the realm of the body.

THE GATHERING of the *prahasana* is like an assembly (the first act is titled, "The Decision of the Assembly"²⁶) at which people keep coming in and express their desires: it is an assemblage of amorous confessions and expressions. People from different spheres of life— a king, a doctor, a soldier, a priest, an ascetic and a barber— create a carnivalesque second life, in which the bodily aspect is venerated. The element binding them together is the body or specifically the desire inherent in the body. Body is the most immediate thing to everyone. It becomes grotesque in the transition from the unfamiliar to the familiar. A binary is created between the old and the young body, representing desire and the pursuit of desire. The incident occasioned at a brothel is itself transgressive, since it is outside the norms of the society. The *prahasana* highlights that a visit to a brothel is usually stigmatized. Bodily desire brings everyone onto a single plane and it is in the pursuit of bodily desire that the grotesque emerges. This pursuit creates a possibility of transgressing the social norms and constraints and thus invites the grotesque. The grotesque figures in the ceremony of marriage in which the young harlot is married off to the old man, and the old harlot is married to the young man. The situation is all the more comic when finally the priest takes both the women away as his fee for conducting the wedding ceremony. The whole situation turns out to be comically grotesque.

In the pursuit of desire, irrespective of its materialization, the feeling that one has crossed the boundary, and the pleasure of crossing it, transfigures the grotesque. Deviation from the societal norms evokes the feeling of horror or disgust along with happiness. The *prahasana* evokes laughter; laughter here signifies not only comic, but also grotesque laughter. It horrifies and disgusts. There is a "co-presence of the ludicrous with the monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying".²⁷ The desire in the teacher and the student to possess the younger prostitute is pushed to the limit when they start abusing each other. The desire in the old man to possess the young prostitute seems bizarre, but the way it is manifested, in the abusive language he uses, in his preparation to physically mutilate his student, one sees the transition from the bizarre to the familiar: the bizarre desire evolves into a familiar drive. There is a change in the nature of subjectivity whereby the desiring subject ceases to function in pursuit of gratification, and the gratification seems rather to be constituting the desiring subject: the sensuous drive constitutes the desiring body irrespective of societal constraints of age, gender, rank or profession; irrespective of whether the body is young or old. The young female body of Mṛgāṅkalekhā ("Moon's-Crescent")²⁸ under the male gaze turns into the site of desire that initiates the transition from the bizarre to the famil-

iar. The grotesque is revealed in this transition, which occurs along various juxtapositions: the young and the old, the healthy and the sick. Old age and sickness are the tropes which *prahasana* employs to figure the grotesque. The body desired by both the young and old male bodies is the young female body and it has been contrasted with the sagging old female body. The old body is the body which has lived and enjoyed. It is not the ascetic body, constrained and regulated. The sagging body invokes the memory of indulgence, of transgression.

The body in the *prahasana* is the body which laughs and enjoys sexual pleasures. Even the ascetic body is occupied in bodily indulgences here. At one point, a character in the *prahasana* raises a question about the possibility of a release of emotions in the life of an ascetic. And the answer he gives is that the release can be obtained by indulging in feasting and body pleasures.²⁹ In every dialogue, there is an implied rhetoric which opposes the social strictures and transgresses them through a recourse to bodily pleasure. Social norms regulate sexual behaviors to control and discipline the subjects. Thus, the *prahasana* presents the recourse to body, to sexual pleasures as the primal move towards transgression. The spirit of transgression is upheld as supreme where the desire for the wives of other men is endorsed, visiting the brothels is encouraged. It is the pursuit of desire that is upheld, through the laughing bodies.

HUMOR SUBVERTS and creates a possibility of renewal of all the oppressive social strictures. The laughter noticeable in the *prahasana* is the laughter of Mṛgāṅkalekhā, Bandhura's daughter. Her initial response is a smile when an aged person expresses his desires for her body.³⁰ This is the smile of repulsion, a very civilized response but it turns into a grotesque laughter when at later point everybody presents in the assembly expresses the same desire. When Vishavabhandā ("The-Rascal-of-the-World") talks about crossing "the sea of love" for her, she smiles.³¹ She smiles at the old worn-out body of the Brahmin. When she is dismissive of the desiring gazes, her mother scolds her for showing disrespect to the Brahmin. She is virtually reduced to a corpse, a body-object lying bare in front of the poutouring of lust around her. Thus, when there is no scope for overt resistance, laughter provides her with a possibility of subversion and so she laughs and mocks: she says, blessed is the student who is going to learn and blessed is his wife too.³² Her *hāsa* subverts and renews at the same time. She laughs at the remedies the doctor suggests and at Ranajambhūka's ("Coward-of-the-Battles", the police chief in the text) narration of his adventurous deed of killing a bee.³³ Her response begins with a smile and grows into loud laughter as a response to the Brahmin's lecherous remarks, the doctor's remedies and the police chief's adventures. Mṛgāṅkalekhā realizes that she cannot raise her voice here because of her status as a prostitute's daughter. Hence, she resorts to the subversive mode of laughter. The doctor leaves the assembly when she laughs at his remedies, saying that he can't stay there as he is being made fun of by a whore.³⁴

The laughing body moves beyond the status of an object and moves onto the tabooed state. The act of trespassing takes it to

the unfamiliar, takes it beyond the fearful strictures. This unfamiliar is unfamiliar to the dominant, but this complies with the nature of the human body: heterogeneous, chaotic, and unruly. The body identifies with this nature and laughs. The transgressive act can be discerned in the laughing body. It laughs off the strictures, it laughs off the norms. The laughter is a mockery of the codes and a celebration of the dynamism of human body. Carnival laughter is a festive laughter, a laughter of the communal body, which brings about the grotesque. Here we are identifying laughter as ambivalent, as inherent in the body: renewing by situating body in a subjective state, by bringing human beings closer to their nature. It is the mimicry of the dominant discourses, in a realistic manner: a corporeal reaction to the masked bodies. Thus, laughter is a physical gesture, a sonoric outburst which shatters the illusion of a controlled, regulated, mechanical being and expresses its chaotic dynamic nature. It is transgressive as it is the pursuit of the inherent nature of the human beings: that is, the desire for transgression, and a threshold to rapture.

Somatic agency: Of rapture and transgression

Rapture is a state that shatters the mask of composure, desire being its driving force. As Nietzsche says, “in the Dionysian rapture there is sexuality and voluptuousness”.³⁵ Bakhtin too recognizes it and says that “carnival has worked out an entire languages of symbolic concretely sensuous forms”.³⁶ When transferred to the symbolic, it is the sensuous image that catches the carnivalistic spirit, or in Bakhtin's terms, in “a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature”³⁷ and thus able to accommodate the carnivalesque. Its effect can be apprehended as a state of rapture, a condition that is gained after the act of transgression which witnesses the shattering of shackles. Nietzsche identifies rapture as “the condition of pleasure” which is also “an exalted feeling of *power*” in which “the sensation of space and time are altered”.³⁸ This alteration is effected by transfiguration which often takes the form of transgression; when it is accompanied by the comic, it effects the carnivalesque.

IT IS THE FORM that makes space for rapture. As Heidegger says, “Form founds the realm in which rapture as such becomes possible”.³⁹ Thus the trans-forming force is at the same time “form engendering force”⁴⁰ as well. The function of rapture coming after the act of transgression should be understood in such a site of transfiguration.

The site where both male and female bodies interact in their inherent impulse to pursue desire and to transgress is what generates rapture in *Hāsyaṛnava*. The desire governs the other impulses; it is manifested in the physiological. The body acts in its own way. The gazing body feels the pain when its desires are not fulfilled. The gazing eye follows the

desired other. The other body too is to be experienced physiologically, not as an outside object but as a part of the body: as something which arouses desire and gratifies. It engenders rapture when all the other feelings get intermingled with this overpowering desire. It takes over the other impulses. In the *prahasana*, those who come to the assembly, begin or introduce themselves as belonging to a certain profession or sect signifying the status and strictures related to them, yet the desire for the young woman dominates them and they transgress their professional codes. The king, who had supposedly organized the assembly to discuss the affairs of the state, is amazed at the beauty of the woman. The police chief narrating his deeds forgets about the stately matters when the young woman makes fun of him. The Brahmin forgets his rites and customary roles, and desires to possess the woman. Many leave the assembly realizing that they don't have a chance.

The desire seeks release in the physiological realm. That is when it generates the rapture which Nietzsche talks about: the enhancement and intermingling of all the impulses. This can be seen further in the way the members of the assembly describe the young woman. The king praises her body in an amorous style wrapped in grandiosity. The priest compares her to a lotus flower, and says that even the gods cannot ignore her. The police chief says once while making love he mistook the red lacquer on the woman's feet for blood from fighting. The student kisses the young woman when he gets exasperated with his own persistence in following her.

The desire leads to transgression inducing the state of rapture. Georges Bataille describes transgression not as some rational external act or event but as an “inner experience”: as experiencing beyond the rational. It is going beyond the “set” and “fixed” and exploring the slipperiness of fixity. The rational/irrational is decided by cultural discourse. But the feelings of fear and pleasure are not such readily available categories and are never so intensely experienced unless one transgresses. The inhibitions are experienced by those who transgress; otherwise they remain discursive categories. As Bataille emphasizes, “fascination and desire” compel the transgression.⁴¹ The need to transgress is not a need as such; it is an intense impulse, an urge to pursue the desire: desire for pleasure— that which rejuvenates. The act of transgression is an act of pleasure.⁴²

Body plays a significant role in the discourse of the transgression. The grotesque undermines the discourse that sees reason

as the only language of critique.⁴³ Corporeal centrality emerges from the need for a “return to somatic symbols” for transgression.⁴⁴ The attempt to transgress is the return to the somatic. The body becomes the most immediate source and medium for transgression.

The body in the *prahasana* depicted as worthy of desire is the young body; it evokes desire and unravels its pursuit of gratification in terms of what Bakhtin calls “exaggeration, hyperbolism,

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excessiveness” which are “generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style”.⁴⁵

Conclusion

As Heidegger has noted, “the aesthetic state is rapture”.⁴⁶ Indian comic tradition attempts to bring forth such a state, while configuring an image of the body. In exploring the comic genre of *prahasana*, this discussion has tried to sketch out a trajectory from desire to rapture in the aesthetic realm that actively participates in constituting the carnivalesque discursively. For Bakhtin it is “carnivalization of literature”.⁴⁷ It is an act of transposition of carnival into the language of literature. The central concern of this transposition is the grotesque imagery, the figure of an open, de-formed, de-ceased body, a body that defies foreclosure. The genre of *prahasana* that is part of the comic tradition in India is also an enactment of such defiance. ✖

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references

- 1 Northrop Frye classifies fictions by the hero's power of action. One of those five modes he identifies is the low mimetic mode. In this mode, “[i]f superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us, we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience”. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction. “High” and “low” have no connotations of comparative value. Frye also identifies the element of irony as integral to this mode due to the lack of moralizing effect. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 31–49.
- 2 Reading the text from the 14th century has relevance in postcolonial context as well. One of the basic propositions that postcolonial studies rely on is the mode of reappropriation through mimicry: that is, creative imitation. In imitating, the text winks at the prevalent structures and seeks renewal through them. Such a re-appropriation, with an element of ambivalence innate in it, does not out-right deny the prevalent structures, rather adapts those structures and thus transforms their nature. Such reappropriation is built into the modes of *hāsya* and the carnivalesque. Therefore, the reading of the text from 14th-century India brings out the relevance of such appropriations that occurs in similar ways across the centuries.
- 3 A few works in this genre from the Middle Ages can be listed here: Bodhayana's *Bhagavajjukiya*, Sankhadhara's *Latakamelaka*, Vatsaraja's *Hasyacudamani*.
- 4 The text subtly refers to the caste structure in premodern India. It emerges in setting the context for *prahasana*. It is based on the reversal of the hierarchy and it is intricately woven into the text. Each instance is a reversal of the established structure. Reading these reversals gives a glimpse into the caste-based structure of the society. It begins with the act of naming the characters. In another such instance, two wanderers are looking for food. One of them suggests that they should go to the courtesan Bandhura's house. The other inquires about her caste. On learning that: “Even an untouchable won't drink water at her house”, he agrees to go to her house for a meal (*Hāsyaṛnava*, 284). The entire set-up of *prahasana* is built on the reversal of the established order. The references to transgression in this paper do not focus on the issue of class and caste, however.
- 5 Bhabha describes mimicry as the “ironic compromise” between the homogenizing impulse to dominate and the pressure from below to change. Mimicry is characterized by an “excess”, thus evolving into an ambivalent discourse. It produces the simultaneous effects of familiarity and difference. This articulation of double effects further adds to the indeterminacy as the object it tries to mimic is also in a state of denial. The process of denial of a certain object has an effect in mimicry. It is significant that the effect emerges when that same object is in the state of denial, therefore, it appropriates at one level and on another level, it denies. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 122. This discourse of re-appropriation becomes significant in the postcolonial context; further more, with regard to the genre of *prahasana*, it reveals how this genre functions along the lines of renegotiation, often throwing up reversals. The notion of the carnivalesque too is based upon such a playful reversal Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
- 6 Switching languages – between Prakrit and Sanskrit, two of the widely circulated languages from ancient India is another way, in terms of dramatic technique, where *prahasana* effects transgression: the characters identified as belonging to the lower social strata occasionally speak in Sanskrit within this genre, which was against the sanctions of classical norms. Thus language, which is also an indicator of social status in the hierarchically ordered society, functioned as a milieu where power structures operate. By executing such a code-switching function, the genre effects the role reversal.
- 7 Bharata, *The Nāṭyashāstra*, trans. Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950), Book VI, 54–59.
- 8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 95.
- 9 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 127.
- 10 F. M. Cornford, “The Ritual Origins of Comedy”, in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 9.
- 11 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 95.
- 12 Viachslav Ivanov, “Dialogue and Carnival”, in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects; Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference University of Manchester*, July 1991, ed. David Shepherd. (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 8.
- 13 Cf. Bharata, *Nāṭyashāstra*; Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavabhāratī*; Henry Bergson, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic”, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Blackmask, 2002), accessed February 2014, <https://archive.org/details/laughteranessay0oberggoog>.
- 14 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 319.
- 15 Bakhtin stresses this often, for instance when he says the grotesque body is “not impenetrable but open” (339); “It is never finished, never completed” (317). It is very clear when he says, “Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque images ignore the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond body's limited space or into body's depths” (317–318). *Rabelais and His World*, 317–318, 339.
- 16 Richard Shusterman's remarks on bodily consciousness are relevant to the discussion here. He discusses the inherent desire for transcendence in human beings (Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 35. He gives the example of different activities like dieting and body building for a culturally pleasing body and how these contribute to producing a “normal” body. The conflict is between the social artifact and the inherent desire to transcend the impositions.

- 17 Viktoria Lyssenko, "The Human Body Composition in Statics and Dynamics: Ayurveda and the Philosophical Schools of Vaisesika and Samkhya", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2004): 35.
- 18 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- 19 Lyssenko, "The Human Body", 31.
- 20 Shusterman, while trying to formulate the notion of "body consciousness", refers to Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily intentionality which grants the body a kind of subjectivity. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 60.
- 21 *Häsyrnava*, 265.
- 22 The frames getting topsy-turvier is significant throughout; mainly in terms of public-private, sacred-profane, blessing-cursing; theatrical inversion of the outer world making the entire text of the *prahasana* itself grotesque-bodied— with excess, protrusion, regeneration— is significant. This is the textual performance of transgression, which is quite often transfiguration: a trans-figur(e)-ation of the values and orders of the everyday world.
- 23 *Häsyrnava*, 268–269.
- 24 *Häsyrnava*, 265, 267.
- 25 *Häsyrnava*, 269.
- 26 *Häsyrnava*, 266, 283.
- 27 Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972), 14.
- 28 Her name can be literally translated as "Moon's-Crescent". She is usually referred to as the Moon-faced One in the text. Moon recurs as a metaphor throughout the text. Other female characters are also described in terms of moon and its phases to refer to their youth and bodily appearance. The text has various references linking the moon to images like "beautiful bowl", "billows of foam", or "umbrella" (*Häsyrnava*, 282). In the first image, it is linked to the round bowl that holds together the drink of immortality. Gods drink the moon in another reference. These references equate the female with the sense of pleasure and the recurrent use of the metaphor objectify the female to the state of inaction. It is through laughter that she acts and breaks through the image of inactivity.
- 29 *Häsyrnava*, 286.
- 30 *Häsyrnava*, 271.
- 31 *Häsyrnava*, 271.
- 32 *Häsyrnava*, 273.
- 33 *Häsyrnava*, 276.
- 34 *Häsyrnava*, 277.
- 35 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 799.
- 36 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 37 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 38 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 800.
- 39 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 119.
- 40 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 115.
- 41 Quoted in Ruth Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime: The Joy of Transgression* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4–6.
- 42 Quoted in Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime*, 4–6.
- 43 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, eds., *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), 43.
- 44 Stallybrass and White, *Politics*, 26.
- 45 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 303.
- 46 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 108.
- 47 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.



The Mora witch trial, depicted in this German illustration from 1670, took place in 1669. It is the most internationally famous Swedish witch trial, and the first mass execution during the great Swedish witchhunt of 1668–1676.