

‘Carnavalesque’ in Volga’s Play *The Six of Them*

**Dr Rahul Kamble**

Assistant Professor

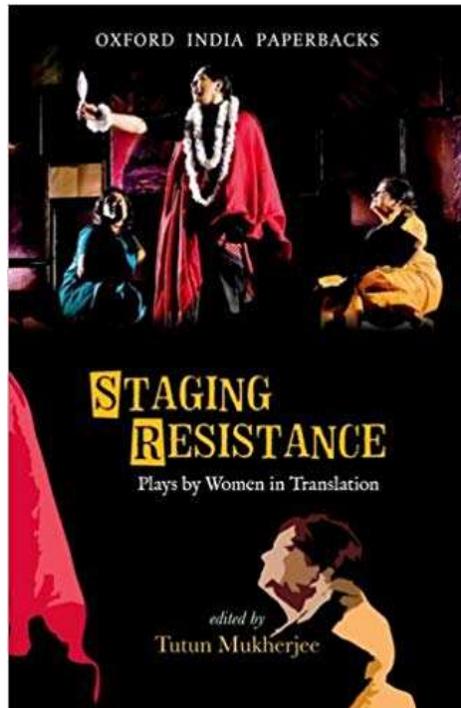
Dept. of Indian and World Literatures

The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

[r4rahulkamble@gmail.com](mailto:r4rahulkamble@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

The concept of carnivalesque, proposed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (trans., 1984), conceives the idea of ‘flouting of the authority and inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted in a season of carnival.’<sup>1</sup> It is done by allowing to mingle the voices from diversified strata of society in order to mock and subvert the authoritative voices, structures and hierarchies which are otherwise considered as sacrosanct and unquestionable. This paper seeks to study how Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque is applicable to Indian woman playwright Volga’s play *The Six of Them*.

The play depicts an imagined conversation of six women characters from Chalam's (another famous Telugu novelist) six different novels. While sharing their experiences with others, they also reveal the contemporary human history of Indian society from women's point-of-view. They mock at the male psyche helplessly trying to reign supreme. The socio-cultural and familial customs, which are/were designed by patriarchy and enforced through structures and practices are ridiculed by women characters on grounds of their meaninglessness. The patriarchal essentials of institutions such as marriage and the assumption that family is the only legitimate structure for male-female relationship are argued against rigorously. Women characters try to be unapologetic about their experiences and beliefs. The real life restrictions and moral code is also taken liberty with. Simultaneously the characters celebrate being themselves free of patriarchal restrictions. Carnavalesque as a method is not only disruptive of patriarchal authority but also a source of 'vitality'.

**Keywords:** Popuri Lalitha Kumari (Volga), *The Six of Them*, Carnival, freedom, inversion of authority, mask, mockery and subversion

### Introduction

During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (BakhtinInt 7)

Popuri Lalitha Kumari, popularly known as Volga, is a Telugu feminist writer and playwright. She is quite influenced by Telugu novelist Chalam. Her novel *Sweccha (Freedom)* (1987) is partly inspired by Chalam's writing. The novel was "an effective exposure of dominating males exploiting society in the name of religion" (Anjaneyulu145). Her play *Vallu Aruguru*, translated in English as *The Six of Them* is about a fictitious meeting of six women characters from Chalam's<sup>1</sup> six different novels. All of the women characters suffer and are traumatized by their male companions and feel confined due to the patriarchal institutions and practices. The play imagines a situation, a purely imaginary and highly tentative though, where they all meet, open their hearts free of fear and pressure. They feel the space with freedom and uninhibition. They throw the mask of the roles assigned to them, speak the language of revolt, and celebrate the body. They live those moments when they are not subject to anyone except to themselves. A pure carnival spirit in words of Bakhtin that, "during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (15).

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<sup>1</sup>G.V. Chalam (1894- 1979) was a Telugu novelist. Written novels like *Sasirekha*, *Maidanam*, *Aruna*, *Brahmaneekanand* and so on with strong women protagonists. The characters in Volga's play are actually those women protagonists.

### **‘Why Marriage When There Is Love?’**

The question ‘why marriage when there is love’ is the central metaphor around which the argument of the play revolves (Volga 472). This questioning is to destabilize the blind acceptance of the custom of marriage as well as to negate the deification of ‘husband’ figure.

Every character’s account of her experiences with the male world topsy-turvy our image of this world. It makes us doubtful about the validity of our opinion about this world. The first character, Sasirekha, has a childhood marriage. After maturity she elopes with her lover, but soon is disillusioned with him. She chooses different companions according to their suitability to her. Later she wants to work for Brahma-Samaj but she is rejected by the women working in the Samaj as sinful woman. An important trait in her character is her immense love for freedom. The way she chooses and leaves men, realizing their moral cowardice, emotional inadequacy and possessiveness, introduces her tremendous daring much ahead than the women of her time. Rajeswari, the second character, lets her passion for love free, uninhibited by the social constraints of the 1930’s in India. She, despite being a Brahmin housewife, falls in love with a Muslim boy Amir, and even aborts her child to keep her love intact. Again, she is attracted towards another man, Meera. She is beyond the charges the society is going to put against her.

Other women such as Padmavati and Aruna, too, love freedom regarding their relationships with men. On the other hand, a woman like Sundaramma is a humble being who is cheated by men for being innocent and ignorant. At the end she kills the doctor who exploited her in the name of treating her child. Sixth and the last woman in the play is Lalsa, who has attained maturity and peace in this treacherous world after long experience.

All women characters’ questioning the marriage or their relationship and dependence upon men appears valid due to limited utility of such relationship from their personal experiences. However, such a confrontation in real life will be seen as a cultural revolt.

### **Carnival**

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin defines Carnival in the following way: Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes, in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*.

Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent “life turned inside out,” “the reverse side of the world” (122).

I shall examine and compare the performance of the play with different facets involved in the concept of carnival. First, it is the carnival, where women, having different fictional existence, come together and share their experiences uninhibited by spatial allowance given by their original creator, Chalam, as well as free from oppressive censorship of the society. They are revealing their inner selves without any fear of criticism. They even clearly reveal their interests and intentions while living with different men, which are bound to be taken as licentiousness in patriarchal society. This uninhibited or excessive freedom enjoyed by the characters is one of the major factors of carnival. About the free atmosphere at carnival Bakhtin says,

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. (Rabelais 10)

From the dialogues of the women characters it clear that despite their being strong-willed they always had pressures from men or patriarchal culture around them. Although they resist they were individual attempts. Their coming together makes that resistance a community affair. ‘All-women presence’ on stage hints at the male dominated relational essentialism is done away with. Characters like Sasirekha, Padmavati, and Rajeswari enter in relationship with more than one man breaking the *Ekpativrata* norm. They talk about their relationships quite unapologetically. The prevalent practice of polygamy is reversed. Here women are shown having experiences with different men. But these love experiences are not essentially sexual indulgences— as has been explained by Sasirekha:

Love for me is different, mine is not lust. Lust is a slight heat that cools down in a minute.  
Love is the sun’s radiance that lights up the entire life. What love desires is not my body, but the soul. (Volga 471)

What has been done to women is done to men, but by avenging the lust and greed in male figure by idealized conception of love.

### **Taking on the Norm**

Secondly, challenging the readymade truths is the crux of the play. The social custom of marriage, which is believed to give security, happiness and name to women, is ridiculed by decoding the grammar of the biased working of the system in favour of males. The women characters in the play often question— ‘why marriage when there is love?’ The sacrosanct and absolutely essential nature given to this institution is strongly objected. Weakness of the social wisdom, in keeping this tradition alive in its present form without thinking of its review from the

point of view of the other gender, is laid threadbare before us. On many occasions in the play the question is asked about the standard of life of those women who revere their husbands as gods. Their blind adherence and compliance to the authority of their husbands contribute to the strengthening of the latter's authority. This blind adherence of the norm and the creator of the norm by women is severely criticized by women characters on the grounds of its outcome to women.

Inadequacy of men to provide security and love is exposed from the revelation of their own experiences. In case of Sasirekha it is Krishnudu, Rama Rao, and Navajeevan Das who fail to give her the emotional prop she required from them at the time of crises; instead everybody tries to impose his wishes on her. With Rajeswari neither her husband nor Amir, for whom she aborts her child, could understand her. Padmavati refuses to get tied down with metaphysical compulsions of marriage if they are incapable to give her freedom to breathe her own. Aruna prefers to go away from the possessive pursuance by a man that engages her. Her love and definition for freedom can be explained in her words,

Freedom is not being afraid of the desires, aspirations, dreams and emotions that emerge from our souls but allowing those natural outpourings to come out from within us and quench the thirst of the lives within. (Volga 481)

This 'natural outpourings to come out from within us' is indicative of the out bursting zest for freedom and life she has.

Each character has her story to narrate and each story deconstructs before us the engendered gender -hypocrisy, underlying the patriarchal desire to dominate, use, and exploit the female gender. Their expression about men and the customs of the society confirms the subject of this paper.

Lalsa's evaluation of men participating in the *satyagrahas* defamiliarizes our ennobled assumptions of all men participating in such noble activities:

Because I couldn't tolerate the hypocrisy and falsehood of the leaders of that Movement..... They enter the jail after condemning the government and in it they plead, bribe, and cheat. I realized that we would not achieve independence because of them or because of the *satyagrahas* that are led by them. (483)

Sundaramma's remarks explain how our evil customs like untouchability are perpetuated for generations involving younger generations to maintain it. She says, "My childhood was spent in guarding pickle jars from people touching them and in making sure no

one touched the ‘pure’ clothes of old women” (485). She expresses her anger against her husband’s possessive nature, “Not letting me go away for a minute, not even a minute, squeezed the life out of me; he died in that pleasurable pain and in that heavenly hell” (485). Sasirekha’s reflection, drenched in her experiences, again gives us evidence. She says,

I thought marrying Rama Rao. But when I saw married people, I could see no life in them. They talk of something called *pativratas*- ... They have become mere slaves... I went away saying I didn’t want marriage without love. I went away saying I also didn’t want to cohabit without love. The day love shrivels, dries up and becomes a burden, I say it’s foolish to stay put because of custom or codes, doubts or promises. (471)

This tearing of the mask, which is worn for centuries by male figure, suits to the occasion of carnival. The physical-arrogance, cultural-proprietorship and divine status are divested off from the male figure. Usually appearing tall, strong, noble, infallible, and divine image of men is painted satirically, sarcastically. Their weakness comes to the fore in Aruna’s words when she says, “We give such a jolt to society that the minute we come to their mind-some are unable to sleep, are restless, angry, and disturbed; ...” (479).

### **Celebration**

Like a carnival there is much celebration in the play. The characters’ beliefs, desires, aspirations (mentally as well as bodily), and likes and dislikes gush out without inhibitions. Sasirekha is a lover of beauty and music. She can give up anything for it. She sees herself through her uncontrolled desires:

To love is a very natural desire. A desire that has sprung from the depths of my heart- I’m a lover of beauty. I can give up anything for beauty... I loved Krishna’s handsome looks, Sundara Rao’s melodic music, and Rama Rao’s truthfulness... is it wrong to love these?... how is it possible not to love? How can I control the desire surging out of every nerve that there is something greater than, and as everlasting as, this beauty and this bodily pleasure? (470)

This is something which she wouldn’t be able to utter in any formal situation imposing moral censorship on speech by women.

Rajeswari too is intoxicated by her experiences when she says, “I am the one who has been intoxicated by my wanderings in the world of happiness and beauty. I am the one who has taken a holy dip in the painful fire that burns the heart.” (474)

Padmavati too had passionate immersion in love:

That day- the last moonlit night that Radhakrishna and I met—in the midst of that beautiful nature we were immersed in each other’s beauty. We didn’t even touch each other... we experienced a happiness way beyond this physical body. (478)

The uninhibited expression of desire, love, infatuation, intoxication is possible only in carnival as the atmosphere is not mandated by usual rules and codes on the inhabitants. In other situations, they would be termed immoral behaviours.

Sundaramma too aspires vainly of life with her child, without any man spoiling their ‘family’. It is probably a dream that she could cherish only in imagination. She wishes, “But... but... if I could have had my baby without that wretched marriage- ...My baby—and I – what a beautiful dream!” (488)

### **Facts and Fancy**

The facts mingle with the fantasy here. The fact is that Sundaramma has lost her child because of the person who acted like a doctor and cheated her. She has the hope only. Likewise, all other women characters had lived their life with bitter experiences with men and have come to this situation of no further hope in sight. However, they cannot stop fancying a new life with their regained self. Their procession at the end is culmination of the much-awaited celebration of ‘self’ moving from personal to political, strengthening the bond of sisterhood and unity. The slogans chanted by them manifest their ideals, which could be dismissed by the patriarchy as utopian and unrealizable. This situates these women characters’ procession on the threshold of fact and the fancy. The truth of suppressed desires and the dream of liberation of the desires:

‘Woman has a body it needs exercise.  
Has a brain it needs wisdom.  
Has a heart it needs experience.’ (488)

The reference here to the ‘body’, ‘brain’, and ‘heart’ does not come casually, nor is it a utopian wish. This is an assertion of the fullness of an individual, ‘a woman’ in herself rather than being a mere figure of *ardhangini*, who can be complete only when seen in relation to her husband.

### **Narrative in the Carnival**

The tone and flow of the play is bumpy and gives jolts to the settled opinions, contrary to a play which observes unities and moves towards a desirable end. It doesn’t allow the dust to settle and constantly keeps us at our toes waiting for another blow. The essential, self-evident, and compelling nature of the (so-called) truths about the concept of marriage is immediate subject of ridicule, censure, and rejection. The women characters do not argue for rejection of

married life as such, but they definitely question and criticize the way the institution of marriage is interpreted, solemnized, used, and abused by patriarchy. How their subordinate roles are normalized in family.

The justification of their decisions and glorification of their 'self' is not linear, orderly, or rational but passionate, emotional, sensitive, and at times militant. Their argument heavily evokes the voice much-suppressed under the patriarchal weight. If we observe the dialogues of the play, there are more questions than the statements which show agreement to existent order.

Questions like, 'Why marriage when there is love?', 'How is it possible not to love?', 'How can I control the desire surging out of every nerve...?', 'What is in society that it can dictate to us?', 'Why should we always yield to its authority?', 'Is eloping worse than miserliness?', 'Can't we have children without recourse to marriage? To have children why is marriage necessary?', constantly unsettle, and give jolt to us. While questioning the authority of the 'man' figure and wisdom of the society in dictating the customs, the women characters ask their sisters to raise their head and revise their loyalties, which are detrimental to their growth as individual beings.

### **Conclusion**

The basic assumptions underlying the concept of carnivalesque, such as flaunting the authority and the dictatorial nature of society and ideological perpetuation of its institutions; caricaturing and mocking the idealized and idolized images of authoritarian figures (in this case husband/s); role-reversing; and the jubilant celebration of the self, manifest conspicuously in the performance of the play *The Six of Them*. The playwright has deregulated the behavior of the women characters from the restrictions which are imposed in actual life of women. She has also freed them from the inhibitions restricting them from expressing spiritual, emotional and aesthetic orientations of their love. Having done so, she has been successful in dramatizing the celebration of the womanhood by choosing representative 'six of them' for performance. The carnivalesque nature of the play is quite essential from the perspective of revitalization of women's discourse. On the utility of this nature Bakhtin says, "(T)his carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality." (Dostoevsky 107)

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