

An Analysis of the Revolt of Black People in *Song of Solomon* Based on Bakhtin's Carnival Theory

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the rebellious acts of black people on the basis of Bakhtin's carnival theory. The world in *Song of Solomon* is put into a carnival world. According to Bakhtin's carnival theory, the carnival square, carnival activities and the carnival spirits are fundamental elements for a carnival festival. The town where black people live is the carnival square. It has the characteristics of wide covering range of people, duality and irony, and most of the rebellious acts happen here. Carnival activities are expressed through acts of resistance. There are two main carnival acts of revolt in this book. The first is the decrowning of Macon Dead and the crowning of Guitar, both of which signify the rebellion of black community against internal and external oppression. The second act is the carnival death of Robert Smith. The death of Robert Smith leads to the birth of Milkman, the one who finds out the mystery of flying African. The final results of black people's rebel are the subversion of fantasy and reconstruction of family link. In the end, black people eventually find the very path towards change and new life.

Key words: *Song of Solomon*; Carnival Theory; Bakhtin; revolt; black people

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One of the central themes that Morrison explores within *Song of Solomon* is the Black community's revolt

against the myriad oppressions that shape their lives. They resort to various ways to rebel against internal and external suppressions. The revolt is not only a political or socio-economic struggle but also a profound quest for self-discovery, cultural reclamation, and freedom. In Bakhtin's carnival theory, their revolt can be seen as carnival activities aiming to subvert the old tradition and reconstruct a new one.

Carnival theory is an integral part of Bakhtinian theory and holds significance in literary creation and criticism. At its core, carnival embodies the freedom of individual life, breaks free from external constraints by surrendering to instinctual desires, loudly proclaims the satisfaction of emotions, and opposes the cold, mechanized rationality of the world. The concept of carnival encompasses all forms of celebration, rituals, and festive expressions, constituting a game without a stage or audience, where everyone actively participates and lives a carnival-like life, also known as the reverse side of life. Carnivals often take place in open and unrestrictive squares and during festive occasions, summoning all individuals to come. Carnivals provide a means for realizing collective thought, with the aim of subverting official and religious structures. As a celebration, carnival is highly ritualistic, highlighted by the crowning and decrowning of the king (the clown), representing the overturning and renewal inherent in carnival culture, conveying the inevitability of change and succession.

CARNIVAL SQUARE: THE TOWN

Carnival square is a fundamental and critical element in Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque. It is the place where all the carnival activities happen. Bakhtin says that carnival square might appear in any different distorted and twisted forms, and also refers to the symbolic field where the cultural meaning is extended. Radical changes always hide somewhere on the square. According to Bakhtin, it is

ambivalence and duality that feature the carnival square. On the one hand, people socialize and meet each other and carnival shows are displayed on the square; on the other hand, it is the place that develops the novel plot. The unnamed town is the carnival square in *Song of Solomon* where the rebellious acts take place because it has the characteristics of a carnival square like a wide coverage of participants, duality and full of irony.

All of black people in this place take part in rebellious activities to fight against inequality. They may resist it in various ways and to different degrees, but they are actually doing it. From the middle-class black people like the Macon Dead family to the bottom of the society like the members of the Seven Days, they are all parts of the carnival festival with the theme of revolt. What's more, large-scale carnival activity such as the death of Robert Smith and personal carnival performances are happening in this place. This square is inclusive of black people of all levels and carnival rebellious activities in various kinds.

This carnival square also has some dualistic features. Black people living in this area need to resist internal class exploitation and oppression, as well as struggle against external discrimination. Macon Dead, with his ruthless and relentless nature, denies economically disadvantaged black people any respite, and at the same time news of black people being killed by white people continues to emerge. Carnival dual images including carnival doubles and carnival contrasts which are integral parts of carnival activities can be found in people on the square. Ruth and Hagar serve as carnival doubles on the square, because both of them are tragic victims of the patriarchal society. Being in an unhealthy marriage, Ruth is trapped in the prison-like family. She fails to seek love and comfort from her husband and son, and gradually withers like a rose. Hagar can be deemed as another tragic figure and constitutes a paired carnival image. When Milkman met Hagar for the first time, he fell in love with her. But when he realized he is attractive to women, he dumped Hagar and called her "the third beer". Unlike him, Hagar has devoted too much in this relationship and cannot let Milkman leave her world. In the end, she died in agony after buying clothes and cosmetics to please Milkman. Pilate and Macon Dead represent as the carnival contrast on the square. Pilate is a typical black woman with strong association to black culture, and she possesses many good traditional qualities of black people. She plays the role of a pilot to guide their people towards the right direction. Macon Dead, however, is black outside but white inside. He ruthlessly pursues money and white men's recognition while ignores other black people's emotions and feelings. He is assimilated by white ideology but Pilate remains the embodiment of black culture.

Irony is another core element of the carnival square. The naming of Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital is of some ironical color. This street used to be called

Mains Street, "but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896 his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street (Morrison, 1977)." Some of the city legislators had notices posted in obvious parts of the city saying that "the avenue running northerly and southerly...had always been and would be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. (Morrison, 1977)" Racism is the fundamental contributor to the formation of Not Doctor Street. The name of the street is a projection of the division between the whites and the blacks. Black people calling it Not Doctor Street is a kind of resistance not only just to the name itself, but also a defense for their own living space. It is an indirect and forced way to express their disagreement to white culture dominance. The name of No Mercy Hospital is also a sign of black people's defiance. It did not allow colored people to enter it, which is against the nature of a hospital to save lives. The two names have ironical meaning and contains black people's own way of resistance to white dominance.

The unnamed town in the north serves as the carnival square with the key elements of wide covering range of people, duality and irony, and it is the very spot where black people exercise their rebellious acts.

CARNIVAL ACTS OF REVOLT

Crowning and Decrowning

Crowning and decrowning are two significant aspects in a carnival. According to Bakhtin, crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift and renewal (Bakhtin, 1989). The decrowning of Macon Dead and the crowning of Guitar are both the revolt of black community against oppression.

Macon Dead's deprivation of Authority. Macon Dead is the dominant figure in black community, and his decrowning can be seen as the rebellion from other members within black community. The ritual of decrowning is counterposed to the ritual of crowning: regal vestments are stripped off the decrowned king, his crown is removed, the other symbols of authority are taken away, he is ridiculed and beaten.

Macon Dead is a tyrant in his family. He treats his wife relentlessly and views his children as his own property which he can manipulate and control freely. He is in control of the family's property, his wife's happiness, the marriage of his daughters and the life of his son. In the meanwhile, he is also in a unique position in the black community. Since he owns many houses and collects rents from his tenants, he holds a certain level of influence among the tenants. He is the richest black people and has a decent job, so other people are somewhat obedient to him. However, he shows

no sympathy to other poor black people at all and is ashamed of his own impoverished sister, Pilate. Due to his oppression of others, from both within and outside the family, there is resistance against him, leading to his removal from the position of authority.

His domestic decrowning is started by his son, Milkman. When he heard that his wife Ruth was invited by her father's patient to a wedding, and she was not called Ruth Dead but Ruth Foster, he went furious and hit Ruth. Milkman, strong enough to fight against his father, violently rebelled his father who is the patriarchal king in this house. "Before his father could draw his hand back, Milkman had yanked him by the back of his coat collar, up out of his chair, and knocked him into the radiator. The window shade flapped and rolled itself up (Morrison, 1977)." As a result, Macon Dead is no longer the dominant one in the family, and his domestic position is subverted. The power center is shifted from him, and he loses his position.

In the black community, people are also trying to challenge his pride and authority. One of his tenants, Henry Porter, threatened him with suicide and harassed him in an ironic way. "Struggling to get the right angle, he was suddenly distracted. He leaned his shotgun on the window sill, pulled out his penis and in a high arc, peed over the heads of the women, making them scream and run in a panic that the shotgun had not been able to create. Macon rubbed the back of his head while Freddie bent double with laughter (Morrison, 1977)." Macon Dead was forced to leave his office in order to deal with the whole ridiculous thing. The obscene behavior of Henry Porter is also a defiance and rebellion of serious Macon Dead, and he says out loud his dissatisfaction and hatred towards Macon Dead in public, which no one had ever done before.

The decrowning of Macon Dead is a way to resist internal oppression within the black group. It suggests that when people are suppressed to a certain extent, they will take measures to strip the authority of the oppressor.

Guitar's Delegation of Power. Born in a poor family, Guitar has experienced lots of unequal treatments. His father was sliced up by a sawmill and instead of life insurance, the sawmill owner only gave his mother forty dollars as a compensation. When Mrs. Bains asked for a delay for rent, Macon Dead threatened to drive them away without the slightest empathy. It is no doubt that Guitar Bains lives in the bottom of society. In order to take revenge on white people, he became a member of the Seven Days and killed white people. Since then his crowning began. When he believed that Milkman stole the gold and cheated him, he decided to kill Milkman. Now Guitar chooses to ignore the social rules and regulations and endows himself the power to take away other people's

lives by rationalizing his behavior. He becomes the king who prowls in the darkness, exercising his right to kill his enemy. However, as is mentioned above, crowning/decrowning is a dualistic process, the extreme behavior of Guitar foreshadows his future decrowning.

The way Guitar chooses to fight against inequality and racism is violent and ferocious, and this kind of rebellion may result to self-destruction.

The Carnival Death of Robert Smith

The death of Robert Smith is of some carnival characteristics. In a carnivalized world, death is deeply ambivalent and it is accompanied by laughter and rebirth. All endings are merely new beginnings. Bakhtin's theory of authoritative structures underscores the deconstruction of societal frameworks and authorities. In his perspective, authority is often perceived as a fixed, oppressive structure maintained through dictatorship, dominance, and restrictions to uphold societal order. However, he contends that these authoritative structures can be deconstructed and altered, and carnival—a disruptive force—plays a role in subverting these structures.

The death scene of Robert Smith is not fearful and tragic. Like a carnival festival, he informed in advance about his suicide and people gathered to watch this. There were rose petals, songs and crowds. He who turned out to be a member of the Seven Days, committed suicide due to inner burden of guilt. Death, for Robert Smith, is a release, liberating him from endless suffering. He chose to resist his fate by opting for the surrender of life.

Robert's death is as indispensable and inevitable as the birth of Milkman. His birth brings about renewal and reconstruction. Milkman is the first colored kid born in the No Mercy Hospital. Later, he is the one who finds out the mystery of flying Africans and finishes the realization of self-growth and self-consciousness. Throughout this journey, Milkman moves from a selfish and juvenile immaturity to a complex knowledge of adulthood (Lee, 1988). His transformation manifested in an increased concern for others, a deepened awareness of his identity and responsibilities, and a heightened appreciation for family history and traditions. This transformation ultimately led him to find inner peace and maturity.

Robert Smith's suicide may be seen as a rebellion against societal structures. By choosing to end his own life, he could express a rejection of traditional authority and societal norms, thereby catalyzing the deconstruction of these structures. Suicide can be interpreted as an extreme form of individual dialogue. Bakhtin's theory emphasizes the importance of individual-social dialogue, and Robert Smith's suicide can be viewed as an attempt to intervene in this dialogue in an extreme manner, garnering societal attention and prompting reflection.

BLACK PEOPLE'S QUEST FOR THE RIGHT PATH

To achieve a better life, black people are seeking for real freedom. Subversion and reconstruction are the final results of black people's rebel. The carnival holds a dualistic meaning: while it dismantles entrenched hierarchical structures, ideologies, and societal norms, it also establishes a fresh existence grounded in the principles of equality and liberty. Subversion and reconstruction are two important carnival spirits. Black people subvert the false image and reestablish their own family root.

Subversion of the Fantasy

For a long time, black people believe that there are chances to achieve class mobility through hard work. It seems that the whole society advocates freedom and equality for all to achieve success if they work hard. As a matter of fact, it is extremely difficult for black people to realize their dreams of accumulating wealth and living a good life.

Despite the economic exploitation and slavery, there are still numerous hardships for them to conquer. One significant act of resistance is seen in Jake's determination to own land. The landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became, for most part, neither legally nor economically their own, but became spiritually their own through their own labor and under the most difficult of circumstances. (Jones, 1988) Milkman's grandfather was a man who believed in American Dream and succeeded in leading a good life and gaining respect from others temporarily. He worked hard and created a paradise-like farm called Lincoln's Heaven and a happy family from nothing. "Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his minds to it and his back in it. (Morrison, 1977)." However, it is ironical that such a great man is called Macon Dead because of a drunk Yankee's careless and stupid mistake. A freed black slave was given an unlucky name when he began his new life, but he achieved something remarkable even in that condition.

His achievements attracted not only other people's respect, but also white men's jealousy and hatred. Though sitting on the fence with a gun to defend his farm, he was mercilessly killed by white people. His children were forced to leave and hide, and his farm was occupied by white people. Lincoln's Heaven was now turned into a hell. The farm represents black people's spiritual comfort and hope, but it is destroyed completely. The newly-established American Dream is shattered and wiped out, and they realize that they are deprived of the right to lead a wealthy life like white people.

The subversion of the false image shows that black people are gradually awakening, so they try to find another route to renewal.

Reconstruction of Family Connection

Milkman, Jake's grandson, embarks on a journey to discover his family's history and roots. In doing so, he becomes a part of the broader narrative of resistance, self-discovery, and the quest for identity within the African American experience.

Milkman embarks on a physical journey to Virginia, the birthplace of his grandfather Macon Dead I. This journey represents a metaphorical return to the roots of his family and is symbolic of a pilgrimage to understand African heritage. Virginia, historically significant in African American history, serves as a starting point for Milkman's exploration.

Milkman finds his family history through a musical way which is a typical element African culture. With the accompanying of the song about Solomon, Milkman came to the world. The song is a bridge of communication between him and his ancestors. When he was in his ancestor's hometown, he heard the children singing that song. He finally got the deep meaning of the song and the legendary story of flying Solomon. Milkman's experiences with spirituality, particularly his understanding of Solomon's flight, are deeply rooted in African mysticism and folklore. The motif of flight has connections to African religious beliefs and liberation. Milkman learns about his family's history through oral tradition, storytelling, and communal narratives. This reflects the African cultural practice of passing down wisdom and history through generations via oral means. By actively engaging with the stories of his ancestors, Milkman participates in the restoration of a cultural tradition that was often suppressed during slavery.

Milkman's experiences in nature, especially his time in Shalimar, represent a return to a more communal and harmonious way of life, reminiscent of African cultural values. His connection with the land and the people he encounters underscores the importance of nature in African traditions and the communal aspects of African societies.

He achieves personal growth and transformation during this journey. Milkman's spiritual awakening is a symbolic reconstruction of African spiritual practices and a recognition of the mystical elements embedded in his heritage. It implies that black people have found their roots and reconstructed their link with family to rebel against the social injustice and oppressions.

CONCLUSION

In the expansive carnival square, members of the black community engage in a myriad of vibrant carnival rituals,

including ceremonies of crowning, decrowning, and symbolic enactments of carnival death, as a powerful means to rebel against the pervasive oppression originating from both internal and external forces. Through these collective expressions of resistance, they awaken to the realization that the societal portrayal imposed upon them is fundamentally distorted, prompting a profound shift in their consciousness. In this awakening, they discern that the most effective strategy to combat their subjugation lies in the deliberate reconstruction of their familial ties and the exploration of their cultural heritage, thereby reclaiming agency and empowerment in their quest for liberation.

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