Research Paper

Tracing the Ambiguity of the Posthuman Condition amid the Pandemic: A Biopolitical Rendition

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ABSTRACT
Over the years, humans have evolved in par with rise of information technology and science into a being that has the capability of a machine or possess the power to enslave all the machines with the tip of the fingers, which eventually resulted in the subsequent breach between the humans and their commitment towards the nature due to the humongous exploitation of its resources by humans. With the outbreak of the corona virus, the centrality of human was deconstructed which resulted in the disintegration of the closed hegemonic hierarchal system. Even though humans became the part of the rhizomatic model, inclusive of all forms of life, the pandemic also called for the incorporation of every aspect of the society into its fold, including the power structures of the society. The focus of this paper is on the ambiguous nature of the posthuman condition during the pandemic by drawing the ambivalent aspect of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalism with its subtle yet dynamic associations with the concept of biopolitics of Michel Foucault. This paper further traces the relationship that exists between the posthuman state, the carnivalism, and the state of emergency during a pandemic.
KEYWORDS: *carnival, state of emergency, state of exception, posthuman condition, biopolitics, feedback loop.*

Even though Jacques Derrida deconstructed the system of binaries theoretically through deconstruction, the authoritative center continued to exist even in the 21st century amidst ocean of technological developments and cybernetics theories that strived to decenter the centrality of humans and all the hegemonic systems. In *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida states an "event", which caused a "rupture" and "redoubling" in the supposed closed system of language as envisioned by Ferdinand de Saussure, which liberated language from the tyranny of structuralism (1). This rupture was not just limited to logocentrism but also to all other disciplines that were built on a supposed center. Being regarded as a digimodern era, a post gender era, post postmodern era and such like, the 21st century never manifested overtly a rhizomatic model of network in the place of a closed structured hierarchy until the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2019. It was an awakening in all humans about the vulnerability of human lives, irrespective of the technological reinforcements, that they are not the central figure but just an element in an interconnected system where all beings of the universe reside.

The methodology of this paper includes a set of different approaches, primarily deductive method alongside the epistemic-ontological method. Since the inference on COVID-19 pandemic is deduced from a different perspective from the general conception, this paper also employs an exploratory method to produce logical insights into the underlying biopolitical powers.

With the outbreak of the novel corona virus, the humans were forced by the necessity of survival to retreat from all the social fronts which had been assisting humans in their endeavors for decades. This virus can be taken as an agent with a strain of ambivalence producing ambiguities when applied to different disciplines. Apart from the general perspective of labeling it as monster, it can also be taken as an agent that catalyzed the posthuman condition by decentering humanism and bringing all forms of life under one inclusive network. In this sense it is ironic in the case of social distancing which is supposed to isolate beings from interaction, but conceiving it as a system where all beings are equally vulnerable to the virus irrespective of class, color, race, gender etc., reinforces the posthuman condition, that is a being "that envisages a transversal inter-connection or an assemblage" (Braidotti 45), amidst the pandemic. Here the body is not seen as a unitary and autonomous

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entity but rather extremely porous and heterogeneous as it does not necessarily has to be prosthetics assemblages. According to N. Hayles:
Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered Homo sapiens counts as posthuman. (4)

From the above excerpt, Hayles states that a posthuman should not necessarily be a cyborg and while interacting with other being like the non-human entities the unitary structure of the body itself is challenged. In this pandemic, the ideal figure of human who is seen as the central being according to Humanism, that is a European white male, neither possesses any privileges nor any transhuman mechanisms to ensure the centrality and safety but is leveled with all non- humans, and inhumans, who were earlier labeled on the basis of the ideal figure, thus breaking down the hierarchy. This agent made humans to go back to the states of primitive man, where the fittest survived in the wild, where the people had to suspend their dependence on machines for their survival. Ironically, what were seen as savages, 'less human' seemingly exhibited less vulnerability during the crisis, which further questions the centrality of humans. During the early phase of the pandemic outbreak, the virus was extremely contagious and robust but towards the later phase, the malevolent grave demeanour gave way to its less fatal variants that were either tolerable or lied dormant inside the host. As the theory of evolution goes, humans tend to adapt and evolve towards the surroundings which reinstate the posthuman condition where the unitary existence of body is deconstructed into a porous one.

The rupture of hierarchies induced by the posthuman condition during the pandemic eradicated all the divisions of between the beings and nonhuman. Though people were separated from each other physically, a prevailed sense of social commitment enabled people to cooperate with each other and with the nature, as well, in order to survive. This metaphorical breaking down of barriers echoes the concept of carnivalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin. Certainly, the idea of carnival and a pandemic are hardly alike in its general manifestations where one implies celebration in its most highest and grotesque way while the other implies disaster and gory. The carnivalesque and the COVID-19 pandemic differ mainly at the features of glee and freedom; the other characteristic features of carnival culture complement the characteristics of the pandemic. The focus of this paper is on the concept of carnivalism rather than the literary theory of carnivalesque formulated by Bakhtin which was used as a formalist tool to decode the social reality conveyed through a particular text. Mikhail Bakhtin postulated his literary theory of carnivalesque in *Rebelais and His World* by analysing the work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and its styles by François Rebelais. Carnivalesque literature challenges the established traditions and systems as it celebrates the grotesque, the voice of the voiceless, blasphemy etc. But the carivalesque literary tradition itself evolved from the festival of carnival celebrated during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which he described as "syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort" which reversed the established traditions and hierarchies and celebrated the taboos of the society. It was during this day people were 'allowed' to break the rules, where the hegemonic social system was reversed and served the underprivileged (Davis 7). According Randy Davis,

He identified four categories of carnival; categories that as he states are "sensuous ritual-pageant 'thoughts'" experienced and played out in carnival by and for its participants. They are: (1) "free and familiar contact among people" as opposed to the "all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (2) eccentricity, which "permits - in concretely sensuous form – the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves" (3) carnivalistic mésalliances – the unification, wedding, and the bringing together of "the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid"; and (4) profanation – "carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc." (7-8)

According to Bakhtin, the category that mock crowns and de-crowns the carnival king embodies "the core of carnival sense of the world- the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal" (Davis 8). The pandemic of the 21st century and the carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance share some common characteristics features. First, as mentioned earlier, the pandemic erased the distinctions between all being regardless of class, race, colour, gender, economy etc. and it was not just underprivileged but also all the people and beings of this planet fell vulnerable to it. In *Rebelais and His World*, Bhaktin says that:
Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. 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. (7-8)

This abstract above can be applied to the situation of pandemic, with the exception of glee and freedom, where people themselves are its subjects, where the laws of the nations are temporarily suspended to

appeal the subjects, where the lives of people are at stake when they step outside to the real world, where the consequences are apparently universal in nature.

Second, the essence of the carnival lies in the concept of death and renewal which can again be seen in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. English literary canon has numerous metaphors of death as the ultimate leveler irrespective of the social status of people as described by Thomas Gray in his poem *Elegy Written on Country Churchyard*, and P. B. Shelley described the wind in *Ode to the West Wind* as both a destroyer and a preserver conveys the ideas of death and renewal. From these examples, it is certain that death is not only viewed as an end but also a beginning or a renewal like the buds being preserved in its wintery bed only to bloom in the spring. Likewise, carnival is the festival that exterminates all the hegemonic structures and then renews and instill a new life in people. In the case of pandemic, the term itself signifies disaster on an unprecedented massive scale with death rates over a million. It is only an apparent ideal optimism to juxtapose the idea of renewal into this situation but since all beings are involved in the rhizomatic network, it is quite legitimate to include the renewal of life happening in nature.

Third, carnival celebration marks the radical break from the normalcy of the society and eventually it has to end to restore life from the grotesque celebration of the subverted traditions to the established 'hegemonic normal' system. Like the impermanence of the carnival, the pandemic is supposed to meet its end, restoring people back to their routine life. When the term normal or normalcy is used in to describe the state of affairs of a society, it also invokes its inherent element, biopolitics.

Humans and all forms of life interact and exchange information, both biological and non-biological materials among each other while continuously leaving a residual trace as the result of the interaction. This not only reinstates that idea of a posthuman but also a suggestive of feedback loop where there is a continuous exchange of information. There are two types of feedback loops: positive and negative. In a positive feedback loop, when an external variable or a change is encountered, it responds or amplifies the change which results in change. Hence, the existing equilibrium is altered by embracing the change whereas; a negative feedback loop tries to curb the change to maintain its state of homeostasis (Martin A. 7-10). So both the carnival and the COVID-19 pandemic are representatives of change from the existing state of affairs. The carnival is known for its impermanence and after the festival the normal state of order was restored. The officials are striving to maintain the homeostasis even during the pandemic in order to restore order. Since the dawn of civilization, biopower and biopolitics have been used as the tools to maintain order in a society and even in the 21st century, it is still both pervasive and deadly. So, hypothetically, biopolitics can be taken as the tool to maintain order during a pandemic or a state of emergency. In order to substantiate the power play that exists during a pandemic, the essay *Panopticism* of Michel Foucault can be taken for analysis. Foucault's concept of capillary function of power and objectification of the passive subjects through surveillance are stated in the essay through the panoptic prison designed by Jeremy Bentham. He begins the essay by describing the state of affairs of 17th century plague stricken society which can be taken up for a parallel analysis to reintroduce the exercising of power during the pandemic in the 21st century. According to Foucault, a plague stricken society calls for the suspension of laws which ideally stood for the well-being of the citizens. The towns were closed down, the people were isolated from each other, and each town was divided further into small different spaces which were supervised by the officials who reported the status of the subjects on a daily basis to their officials (195-96). That is, "the relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power, the registration they make of it, the decisions they take on it" (196-97). According to Foucault:

It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly…The gaze is alert everywhere: 'A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance', guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, 'as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion'. (195-96)

Thus, under the constant surveillance people became passive, inert and obedient subjects of powers that hence managed to discipline people by introducing new rules during the state of emergency. Hence, the state of emergency itself became the ideal situation for effective governance over the people with optimum opacity. Foucault, thus, established that, in order to manipulate the subjects into passivity, a physical embodiment of panoptic prison itself is not necessary but a constant surveillance of people without transparency would suffice. The panoptic surveillance along with the state of emergency where the rights and rules are suspended marks an ideal state for governing.

The reintroduction the Foucauldian principles of power in the 21st century, open up ambiguous statements because of the ambivalent nature of the pandemic. First, the feedback loop never embraced the change, but harnessed the variable to maintain the ideal situation with the help of capillary function of the power during the pandemic, thus continuing the homeostasis. In other words, there never was a change but an illusion. Hence, the statement of Terry Eagleton, "carnival is a form of transgression approved by existing authority, offering a sense of change...an illusion" is significant in this scenario (Wood). There are critics who argue that

carnivalesque is used as "tool to maintain the status quo" (Wood) which further throws light into false consciousness created in the minds of people. Second, with capitalism and all other power structure operating alongside a progressive 21st century society, the so called principles of interactive network are prone to ambiguity resulting in an ambivalent sense of freedom which is constrained by power structures. This further establishes the ambivalency of carnivalism and the pandemic, which manifest the pandemic as the ideal situation for governance, as one of the dimensions of its ambiguity. Third, under the disguise of surveillance as a safety tool, the Repressive State Apparatus takes more advantage of the passive state of the people whose rights have been suspended during the pandemic that forced them to exist in the state of exception as "*homo sacers*"(Agamben). The brutality and the violence of the Repressive State Apparatus towards the *homo sacers* were graciously ignored having to deal with the pandemic as the 'priority'. Fourth, equating the pandemic as a giant modern panopticon, with the lack of transparency that used media as agents to divert subjects to irrelevant matters, by consuming the inertness of the people, they became the subjects of power trapped in between their subtle 'labyrinth of hierarchy'.

The aim of the paper was not to offer definite conclusions by drawing the theories of Foucault and Bakhtin but to stress on the ambiguous nature of the social reality. There are optimistic and positive sides created by the pandemic like the social commitment and humanity but the ambiguity is never out of this situation. The medical institutions have always been an institution that segregated the 'normal' from the 'abnormal'. The strategies of exercising power had undergone a paradigm shift from physical exertion to self-regulation over the years. With the virus outbreak, people had to regulate themselves in order to survive and to be normal. Apart from the interplay of the power structures, there existed an innate fear in people to not be locked inside of a health institution which further contributed to the self-regulation of people. Hence, in one of the other perspectives, they choose to not to be a *homo sacer* and a member of heterotopia. There are many dimensions like scientific, psychological, environmental, anthropological etc. to the same issue. By focusing on carnivalism and posthuman condition to interpret the social reality of COVID-19 pandemic by drawing the biopolitics of Foucault, this paper managed to state the ambiguous nature of the social reality.

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