

Performing the Self: A Bakhtinian Carnivalistic Reading of Amita Parikh's *The Circus Train*

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Abstract—This study employs Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on "Carnival", to interpret Amita Parikh's novel *The Circus Train* (2022) as part of the broader framework of historical fiction that examines themes related to identity, belonging and psychological resilience against the backdrop of World War II. It addresses a gap in previous research by being the first to utilize a carnivalistic approach to the analysis of *The Circus Train*, demonstrating how Bakhtin's theory on Carnival is applicable to identity-construction processes and self-discovery within the context of chaotic, liminal spaces beyond the medieval celebrations Bakhtin made reference to. The methodology used in this study consists of a qualitative approach to literature, combining Bakhtin's carnival model with a close textual analysis in order to understand the relationship between the grotesque realism within literature and social hierarchies and the transformation of individuals. This study indicated three findings: 1. The novel critiques established power relationships of the time, allowing for the marginalized characters to re-negotiate their identities and reclaim their agency; 2. The use of grotesque imagery enhances our understanding of the themes surrounding adaptation and survival and gives us insight into how humans made sense of the world in a time of crisis; 3. The "Carnival" becomes a transformative strategy of individuals fostering resilience, liberation and self-definition in the face of destruction. By integrating Bakhtinian theory with contemporary literary discourse, this study offers a deeper understanding of how narrative spaces nurture emotional development and identity formation in historically disrupted contexts. It further recommends extending carnivalistic frameworks to the analysis of literature concerned with war, displacement, and belonging, as such approaches uncover hidden dimensions of human agency, trauma, and renewal, positioning *The Circus Train* as a pivotal contribution to modern studies of identity and transformation.

Index Terms—identity construction, Bakhtinian carnivalesque, grotesque realism, resilience and self-discovery, historical fiction narratives

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the notion of Carnivalism as conceptualized by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Mikhail Bakhtin has had a substantial influence on many scholars and on Western literary and cultural thought through his diverse set of engaging thoughts and theories about literature. This paper provides a Carnivalistic reading of Amita Parikh's *The Circus Train* (2022). Although amusement and exaggeration are evident elements of carnivalistic writing, this is not the full extent of what is usually considered Carnivalistic. It is clear, however, that there is an assertion of the existence of a carnivalistic perspective that would highlight the extent to which these writings provide for exploration of the existential aspects of the human journey through the human condition and the human experience. *The Circus Train* depicts The World of Wonders, which is presented as a travelling luxurious Circus with Lena Papadopoulos as the main character; Lena is presented as an ambitious young woman with a brilliant mind but with a body that does not support her ambition, due to her disability. Amita Parikh wrote *The Circus Train* with the intent of taking the reader to a deeper level than simply laughter and chaos and absurdity. The novel illustrates the relationship between reality and illusion through such themes as; love, ambition, identity, resilience and personal growth. It embraces a carnivalistic spirit within a chaotic circus and adventurous world, set against the looming backdrop of World War II and the turmoil it brings to the magical World of Wonders.

Bakhtin (1984) famously notes that “The sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world” (p. 107). Carnival, as one may think of, stands for a temporary and busy event in which there are a number of activities where people go head over heels as they dress up in costumes, perform entertaining acts, play music, dance, and do magic tricks. Carnivals often introduce cultural, traditional, and even religious concepts and are known for their exaggerated and colorful costumes and decorations, as well as their lively music and chaotic atmosphere, while combining some elements of a circus. The Carnival refers to a specific period when certain people of different cultures participate in lively festivals of a world in travesty. During this period, traditional cultural values are inverted, “new rulers” are humorously appointed to control the uncontrollable; and where the generally accepted rules of natural polite behavior are set aside in favor of the free-spirited and chaotic nature of Carnival that according to Frazer (2012), holds “the stamp of a dateless antiquity” (p. 17), celebrating the body, the senses, and the unofficial relations among humans (Danow, 1995, p. 6).

The concept of carnivalization in literature, according to Bakhtin, involves a temporary disruption of social hierarchies and norms, where authority is overturned and denied, and grotesque body parts, humor, mockery, and dialogue become central elements. The carnival stands in opposition to conventional norms, transforming ideals of beauty and grace into an exaggerated portrayal of bodily dysfunctions, turned by Bakhtin’s ideas into irony. As Spooner (2007) notes, “Within the limited space of the Carnival festivities, the raucous bodily humor associated with the grotesque may temporarily disrupt or overturn conventional hierarchies of power” (2007, p. 32). *The Circus Train* has notable instances of carnival-like actions all around its bizarre character stories. Also, the frequent comic reliefs in the story do not erase the presence of the theme of individual growth coming from the person's toil to find oneself through traumatic experiences (Adel et al., 2024).

The character of Lena is a perfect representation of this resilience manifested in her strong desire to build her own life, which is not only restricted by the gender norms of her time, but also by her physical condition. Lena's choice to pursue medicine/science in spite of the prevailing male culture is indicative of her remarkable strength. Lena adjusts her plans and continues to go ahead even where others might have given up in the face of losing her mother, being rejected by her community, and being separated from her father and Alexandre during the war. She may be difficult for others to see, but Lena is walking towards her strongest self, carving out her independence, and claiming her uniqueness. Alexandre is also a person haunted by a traumatic past, yet he makes it his mission to unearth love, family, and a significant goal in life, which he calls his purpose. This dedication is the foundation of the ongoing development and the broadening of Alexandre, who is showing it as the most robust of the human qualities. Parikh summarizes the horrors of World War II, and among them, he points out the capture of Theo and Alexandre and their subsequent transformation into the 'good' Nazi's propaganda factory. The two men have acquired tremendous inner strength and have even discovered a light in what would otherwise appear to be an endless dark time of suffering. The resilience has provided both, the hope and the strength, to not only the survivors but also the men who are reunited with Lena after the long eight years.

The progress of the novel portrays Alexandre as a person with inner strength and also with creativity and resourcefulness, while he was a prisoner at the time of the war. The hero has gone through a lot of adversities, separation, loss, and extreme suffering all due to the distance from Lena. Yet still, Alexandre's and Lena's love has been their source of hope even during the hardest times. Alexandre has faith in the strength and the bravery of Lena; this in turn makes Lena wish to follow her road to freedom and her dreams, thus portraying the themes of love, bravery, ambition, identity, perseverance, and resilience that spread like a web throughout the story. The struggle for characters in the novel to find their social place has been evident because they have had to deal with such issues as race, family, and acceptance by others. Lena's strength of spirit and determination has already led her to personal growth. Alexandre and his complex racial identity, with a haunting past, become a symbol of resilience and survival. At the end of the novel, Lena moves beyond the constraints of both her father and the circus. She carves out a life that aligns with her desires and values, marking her journey toward self-discovery and acceptance, along with a genuine sense of personal growth.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper, the first carnivalistic analysis of Parikh's novel *The Circus Train* (2022) is presented, along with an outline and an interpretation of the work. The study is grounded on a previously well-established framework of scholarly works relating to Bakhtin. Foundational works for this analysis can be found in two recent works; Eweis (2021), *Origins of Bakhtin's Theory of Carnivalization*, and Grubel (2022), *Carnival, Carnivalism and Bakhtin's Culture of Laughter*, which give full account of Bakhtin's theoretical framework through the lens of the way the carnival concept has been developed and elevated to a place of prestige in literature. Eweis links the origins of the carnival to ancient festivals that were a major influence on the way Bakhtin developed and adapted the elevated carnivalesque concept for his use in literature. Kumar (2024), *Analysis of Bakhtin's Carnavalesque in the Light of Laxman's Cartoons*, discusses carnivalistic elements, including laughter and the grotesque, as they can be identified in political cartoons.

Many scholars have focused their analysis of carnivalesque elements in their work primarily on humor and subversion while neglecting more in-depth analysis and limiting their reflections to a general definition of the term. Recent postcolonial analyses of *The Circus Train* in the context of post-9/11 Islam, like the one conducted by Alhourani

et al. (2025) on Rohina Malik's *Unveiled* demonstrating how different types of performance and symbolic rituals can empower marginalized voices and - through performance - challenge cultural domination. A primary concern of this work is to address the identities of Muslim women post-9/11; while their observations of the way in which performance serves as a form of resistance influences their work on *The Circus Train*, the discussion here relates to the conditions of identity and agency as experienced by both groups of women as they occupy similar liminal and disorderly spaces on *The Circus Train* and post-9/11.

Furthermore, Elhalafawy et al. (2025) describe how identities come alive through performances in contemporary plays, providing a very palpable dimension of how characters, just like those in Parikh's historic world, find and rediscover their identities during transitional periods. In the same way, Abou Adel et al. (2025) demonstrate how characters in *Mockingbird* reshape their identities whenever rigid social norms are imposed on them—a struggle that echoes the carnival-like breaking of boundaries and deep resilience found in *The Circus Train*.

This study provides a broader, psychologically nuanced representation of the surrealism of the carnival experience. It explores how *The Circus Train*'s carnivalesque space provides an opportunity to comprehend the connections between personal identity and the ability to be adaptive, to remain open to emotional possibilities, and the relatedness of the individual to the society in which they exist during those times of societal upheaval. In this example, themes of personal identity and resiliency, as well as personal transformation, are applied to the construct of the unstructured surrealism of the carnival experience. With respect to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Parikh's work may be perceived as a transgression against established forms of class-based dominance, highlighting the artistic merits of transforming the roles of individuals, as well as creating a space for previously marginalized voices to take centre stage. Bakhtin developed his theory in response to Rabelais and His World as well as in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, which he offers to reinforce the genre of the carnivalesque as a literary genre with the specific characteristics of challenging dominant ideologies, through the use of comedy, chaos, and absurdity. Among the major attributes of the theme of the carnivalesque are the reversals of established social status, the legal right to engage in humour, the belaboured or grotesque body, as well as a temporary disregard for existing conventions. Bakhtin utilized the framework of the carnivalesque to provide a setting for the deconstruction of established norms within society, thus providing an environment that fosters experimentation with new forms of identity and interaction within the community.

III. METHODOLOGY

By connecting the Bakhtinian carnivalesque features and atmosphere to Parikh's *The Circus Train*, the current paper sheds light upon the deeper challenges on this connection, unraveling all the carnivalesque aspects in the novel, seeking a deeper perspective on how identity, resilience, and personal growth are shaped during the background of a chaotic, circus-like, carnivalesque environment which is about to go through dark, sinister events of World War II.

IV. DISCUSSION

In ancient times, people held carnivals to celebrate without reservations and also banished bad omens, viewing them as ways to create better mentalities and restore psychological stability and balance for the unfortunate and oppressed social classes. Carnivalization arose naturally as a response to the oppressive nature of the social structures at the time; it served as a primary form of art and fun, making the majority of ordinary people feel at ease and relaxed. The carnival also brings people closer together, as all different social classes of people are allowed to participate in the celebrations regardless of class or status. This can encourage people to easily interact with each other and hang out with strangers who could be above their social class, whom they would never get to interact with in ordinary life.

However, Bakhtin's conception of Carnavalesque diverges slightly in certain aspects and techniques, offering a more fitting application to literary works. He describes the carnival as “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal”, standing in opposition to all that is normal or conventional (1984, p. 10). Carnival “marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (1984, p. 10). The carnival spirit leaves people to act in unconditional and chaotic ways, dissolving traditional class boundaries, social norms, and expectations of refined behavior. In this liberated environment—where order is overturned and discipline subverted—ordinary people are temporarily elevated to kings, and kings are subjected to mockery and dethronement: “mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124). Bakhtin's idea of Carnavalesque thus presents an inverted and fantastic image of the world. In this carnival space, all individuals are equal. As Bakhtin (1984) observes, “The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life” (p. 123). Terras (1991) sheds light upon a “universal human impulse toward carnival as a revolt against and reversal of fixed values” (p. 519)—in other words, carnival is the chaotic longing to establish freedom behavior of anything unusual and changing known values and norms. Bakhtin also acknowledges that “Carnival” is a broad concept, and its meaning has changed over time. He observes that while some forms of carnival life have disappeared, many of its main features persist, but in more simplified and transparent forms.

Bakhtin's theory of Carnivalization establishes a strong link between the festival traditions of ancient cultures such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, as well as their religious ceremony roots. Carnival developed from these early traditions, which left their mark on societies during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when they became an escape from the

normal routines of life; people started to follow these rituals again for this reason. Carnivals allowed for foolishness and fun; people would wear strange costumes, behave in irrational ways, make foolish comments, and act without regard to social conventions or rules of conduct for a short time. The carnival gave people a temporary and separate world that was governed by equality and freedom. Bakhtin also values an important characteristic of the carnivalesque, which allows actors to take action in ungoverned and transgressive manners. Carnival provides an outpouring of behavior that is contrary to social norms, and abolishes the restrictions imposed by law, morality, or custom. This unleashing of the carnivalesque allows people to shed the stress of their classes, and of everyday life's expectations and speak out freely and without reservation. In addition to this, the carnivalesque resists the dualistic perspective that is associated with most people in Western societies.

Rich and poor, high and low, educated and uneducated, are all temporarily dissolved from one another, hence any kind of person can coexist. Those who usually have sacred or authoritative positions are unable to retain their power during the carnival, which is a strong though temporary reassessment of the ideals of freedom and equality. The carnivalesque was the spirit of the carnival that was present in many different ways throughout time and across cultures. One of the most remarkable ones is the celebration of love. It started as a Christian martyrs' feast, but little by little it lost its religious character and became more and more a festive and ritual-like celebration. Gifts, cards, and dinners for two are some of the elements of the celebration of love. The same can be said about chronological milestones: family events such as christenings and memorials are also dedicated to celebrating and embodying life's hardships. Acknowledging the challenges of life while celebrating it through ceremonial festivity makes these events that are often linked with renewal and rebirth, just like Folch-Serra (1990) who interprets Bakhtin's theory as an upside-down world view of change, death, and rebirth, "just like the rituals of festivals in the popular culture" (p. 254).

The carnival spirit can also be found in the Western literary traditions. The infiltration of the carnival into literature—a term Bakhtin calls "carnivalization"—is nothing less than a transformation of form and purpose, as the disruptive, liberating energy of the carnival takes over the domains of narrative and genre. Nevertheless, Bakhtin leads back this literary advancement to ancient philosophical works and the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire in particular. The Socratic dialogue, which is an account of the discussions between Socrates and his pupils, was a popular and dialogic literary form. When Kristeva (2022) says so this is the case she points out that these dialogues not only disseminated the truth but also gave the people the chance to participate in the discussion, thus conserving a very lively method of inquiry aiming at the uncovering of many truths (p. 80). "The most Carnivalized literary forms at the very beginning are the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire", claim Selden et al. (2005, p. 41). The relationship between dialogism and carnival is also illustrated by Bakhtin's focus on the subversive quality of Socratic discourse. Sullivan (2009) goes so far as to say that "the most inquisitive and challenging Socratic dialogues are rooted in ancient, medieval traditions of carnival" (p. 329). Similarly, Bakhtin (1984) states that Socratic dialogue opens up a carnival-like atmosphere by refusing to accept closure and finality: these texts "bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely" (p. 25).

The main feature of the Socratic dialogue is that it is able to bring together opposites—life and death, spirit and body, certainty and doubt. This interaction is an image of the philosophical and literary approach of the time that was all about sharing and including people, hence keeping no fixed hierarchies and rigid ideologies. Both Bakhtin and Socrates denied individualism and limited convictions in similar ways; they chose a world that could represent and include all kinds of people, with their varied and even strange points of view. It is said that the Socratic dialogue includes many elements of the carnival world but in a more serious manner that draws attention to human involvement. As Zappen (2012) states: "He [Bakhtin] insists that the Socratic dialogue is not a rhetorical genre but a carnivalistic genre, like the other serio-comical genres in its carnival atmosphere but perhaps more serious than comical in its concern with the dialogic nature of truth and human thinking about the truth" (p. 21).

In addition to the Socratic dialogue, Menippean satire is another literary form that directly embodies the carnival spirit. According to Aksehir (2012), the genre is characterized by "the cynical nature of the genre and the carnival spirit it employs" (p. 72). Menippean satire uses laughter, irony, and exaggeration to overthrow prevailing values and reveal social absurdities. Swift (2009) describes satire as "a work or manner that mingles a censorious attitude with humor and wit for the betterment of human institutions or humanity" (p. 9). Although Menippean satire is less direct than other forms of satire, it moves between the comic and the dark tone thus allowing nuanced and layered critiques of societal standards. Additionally, Menippean satire is a classic example of carnivalized literature. It creates a space for people to express their dissent through absurdity and inversion, thus reflecting the upside-down world of medieval carnivals. Bakhtin (1984) notes, "there are elements of the carnival in every Menippean satire" (p. 40). Drawing on this, parody and mockery function as tools for both criticism and celebration. Therefore, the genre turns into a literary area where the usual limits are not only crossed but also questioned.

It is said that Menippean satire as a genre was more interlinked with the carnival world than the Socratic dialogue, and this could be due to the influence of carnivalized folklore. As a result, Menippean satire has generated a carnival sense of the world in literary works. This genre manifests the comic aspects of the carnival. The world transitorily turned upside-down during the European festival of fools and carnival, with its mock priests, Bishops and Popes, as the normal social hierarchy was inverted. In explaining the rituals of folk carnival, Bakhtin shows that "during the carnival

there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions [...] of usual life" (Morris, 2016, p. 203). In this brief but radical interval, the emperor might become a slave, and the social world is turned upside down.

Bakhtin means that the Roman dramas of Menippean satire often contain closely connected elements to the carnivalesque spirit. These elements, just like a carnival, temporarily suspend different societal norms and hierarchies. The key elements of Menippean satire, as described by Bakhtin, include appearances by historical figures, wild flights of fantasy, and explorations of ultimate questions, a universe with three levels (multiverse), abnormal mental states, madness, strange dreams, and chaotic being. Essentially, Bakhtin views Menippean satire as a "quest"—a journey into an alternative world to probe the profound realities of our own. Through the staging of an excessive, distorted, and deviant perspective from this marvelous world, Menippean satire condemns and rejudges the ordinary world that is stereotypically represented as stale and common.

Furthermore, the genre's inversion allows for a carnivalistic explanation in which the oppositions collapse: human and animal, actual and virtual, holy and unholy. Grotesque bodies, masks, disguises, and hybrid entities live in this domain of transformation. These journeys often involve symbolic acts of "crowning" and "decrowning," reflecting both the instability and the renewal inherent in carnival. Through these instruments, Menippean satire challenges rationality, belief systems and conventional morality.

Crucial to this transformative space is the concept of the grotesque, an essential aspect of the carnivalesque. It has basically started as a form of art which combines the shapes of both humans and animals until it finally landed to embrace the strange, distorted, and bizarre visual arts and literature (Kayser, 1963). As Hitchcock (2016) notes, the carnival enhances a "site of excessive consumption and perverse performance, often bordering on the grotesque, and allows for the emergence of voices and unconventional pleasures that have been muted in other registers of the picture" (McKittrick, 2016, p. 86). However, laughter and satire play a vital role in this feature as tools of social critique, allowing and encouraging people to ridicule/mock and challenge established social traditions and beliefs. The Bakhtinian grotesque is arguably "full of carnivalesque laughter and devoid of fear" (Chao, 2010, p. 3). Bakhtin (1984) defines the theme of grotesque realism as a form of folk humor; he explains that the core of grotesque realism lies the act of bringing what is elevated—whether spiritual, idealized, or abstract—down to a material, bodily plane. It involves grounding lofty concepts in the tangible realm of the earth and the human body "in their indissoluble unity" (p. 19). In this light, degradation becomes a means of regeneration and the birth of new meaning. However, Edwards and Graulund (2013) strongly take sides against Bakhtin highlights that a text geese repurposed as toilet paper, sexual acts, cannibalism, and cannonballs made from human hair, in addition to other passages that depend on crudeness, silliness, modes of exaggeration, and "indecentcy" (p. 36) which are 'low material' or 'inappropriate' or 'absurd'.

The transition from the theoretical framework of the carnivalesque to the main concern of this study- identity- the novel *The Circus Train* provides a compelling narrative of personal growth, resilience, and cultural transformation. Within the novel, social values have a considerable impact on the individual's capability to claim a consistent identity (Peltola et al., 2004). Identity, whether in literature and psychology in a wider sense, consists of many elements: family, social roles, cultural background, gender, physical affliction, beliefs, and lived experience. The overlapping of identity in literature and life generally takes the influence of social limitations, personal history, and one's desire for a meaningful life. These factors are instrumental in the development of personality, providing a common ground for grappling with the intricacies of human existence. The search for acceptance and identity is vital for one's growth and achieving success, both in terms of society and culture.

Bamberg (2012) argues that identity is the effort "to differentiate and integrate one's self in various ways according to social and personal dimensions like gender, age, race, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territories" (p. 241). In other words, people build up their identities in connection with several overlapping contexts. *The Circus Train*, for example, is a story that tells a search for identity that is also a journey towards belonging, as well as meaning and autonomy. Identity narratives are vital for both personal and social change. According to McAdams et al. (2006), "our narrative identities are the stories we live by" (p. 4). Viewed in this way, the carnivalesque is not merely a means of social critique but also a metaphorical area wherein the identity, resistance, and renewal may be rethought.

Identity and belonging are undeniably important and fundamental features of human life. They are very much connected to our self-image, world perception, and interactions with others. Fiction has always dealt with these subjects, and through the centuries has brought to the surface the human longing to know oneself and to know one's position in the world. In literature, identity is used to unravel the different layers of an individual's identity defined by personal history, culture, and internal point of view. Moreover, the author usually considers the values, beliefs, and desires of the character and portrays the character's identity formation as, simultaneously, a result of the social context. In contrast, belonging depicts the strong human desire for connection, affiliation and acceptance. It refers to locating people's place in their environment and the characteristics that define them and provide the feeling of safety and being at home. The role of identity and belonging in literature is that it can profoundly mirror the human condition, simplifying the intricacy of human experiences.

Literature is posited as a medium through which authors can present the difficulties, chances, and triumphs that are involved in the process of finding oneself and the universal longing for acceptance. For the readers of literature, it lays open different viewpoints and it even more pushes them to liaise with characters whose life stories are basically the same. All this can lead to self-awareness, introspection, personal growth, and better self-knowledge. Besides, literature

may undergo such a transformation by challenging social norms and biases that are hard to bear by giving more power to the once silenced and at the same time, showing the struggle of those marginalized groups who are fighting for their right to belong. Through such stories, literature can be an instrument for social justice, identity, and affirmation of the uniqueness of each individual. The act of reading literature also promotes self-reflection as it allows the readers to not only reflect on themselves but also on the choices that have made them who they are (Ojaide, 1992), since they are ushered to seek their own self-actualization through the characters' experiences. Kramersch (1998) also proposes that literature gives the readers the possibility of sharing the identities of the characters and thus, the comprehension and sympathy towards the characters are promoted. Hence, identity and belonging come to the forefront as major literary themes that reflect man's incessant desire for meaning and definition.

The issue of personal growth—the change of thoughts, feelings, and overall perspective—comes very close to identity. This change, however, usually brings along the power of being more unyielding to difficult situations. One's growth can be through many avenues of life, from trauma and hardships which are often the causes of development to others. Studies have indicated that the growth due to stress is coupled with a better quality of life (Park et al., 1996). The concept of personal growth is implicitly present in rudimentary models of human development as well as in psychological theories that claim to explain well-being. (Ryff, 1989; Algobaei, 2025). According to King (2001), one can only see the development and self-improvement that have come through life experiences by reflecting on previous ones. Therefore, the human urge to find identity and community—along with one's life experiences—brings about a feeling of transformation and the desire to be the best version of oneself.

As Parikh poignantly writes, “Magic isn't just in the tricks we conjure; it's in the hearts we touch” (2022, p. 4). Her debut novel, *The Circus Train*, masterfully combines magic and darkness, inviting readers into a world of emotional depth and transformation. Set in the late 1930s and around the horrific events of World War II, the novel introduces Lena, who is the daughter of Theo Papadopoulos, a brilliant and respected illusionist in a traveling circus called the World of Wonders. Despite growing up surrounded by the circus's magic and never-ending fiesta, and despite her father being the headliner illusionist of the circus, Lena does not feel like she belongs in the World of Wonders, as she feels like a stranger in a familiar place, and that she does not get along with people in the circus. And when Clara, Lena's governess, tells her to “make a friend or two”, she replies: “They won't like me [Lena]” (p. 24).

Instead of the magical World of Wonders, Lena is interested in the magic of the real world; she prefers a field of science and medical research more than the illusions that her father pulls and that magical world around, and this may be due to her polio/disability, as she has been on a wheelchair ever since she was a child. Lena has always felt like she is a burden to the people working in the circus, especially Horace, the wealthy heir who has brought this whole circus together, and who Lena always thought that “he viewed her as a never-ending bill he had to pay in order to keep her father happy” (p. 23). Lena feels that people would act as if they like her when they really do not, and the other kids on the train would only pretend to be nice to her, she thinks that “They'll only pretend to be nice in front of all the grown-ups. Then they'll go back to ignoring me [her]” (p. 25). However, Lena's life changes when she rescues Alexandre, an orphan with a mysterious past, and convinces the circus to take him which leads to friendship and love she feels for the first time in her life. And as the war is around the corner, Lena gets separated from her father and Alexandre after they get captured by the Nazis. Now completely on her own without functioning legs to rely on, Lena is forced to explore and face a dark and dangerous world alone; as she sails through a journey of self-discovery, resilience, finding strength within, and believing in herself despite her circumstances.

Carnavalesque elements, as theorized by Bakhtin, permeate *The Circus Train*. To understand how Parikh employs Bakhtinian features, it is essential to examine the World of Wonders, the circus community Lena inhabits. The World of Wonders, as elaborated in the title of the novel, *The Circus Train*, is a traveling circus, more akin to a community traversing European countries by luxurious train cars. The circus, traveling from one country to another aboard a train, is a world of its own, filled with ambitious performers bound by their common pursuit of wonder and spectacle. This circus is filled with chaos, mystery, magic, and drama; showcasing acts and performances like fire jugglers, mermaid equilibrists, and other magicians and illusionists. The circus acts are described as extraordinary, featuring a display of performers who bring a magical atmosphere to life. This circus is where Theo, a master illusionist and the star performer, performs tricks and illusions to impress the audience. This circus provides a sense of charm, magic, and escape even when the world around it grows more dangerous.

A key feature of the carnivalesque is exaggeration—colorful costumes, elaborate masks, and eccentric behavior—elements that permit individuals to express repressed facets of their identity. Bakhtin asserts, “Eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits - in concretely sensuous form - the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves” (p. 123). This is evident in descriptions of the circus's dining hall where chandeliers “hung from the ceilings, making it look like diamonds were raining down on the tables”, and there was also “Blue paper flecked with gold leaf lined the walls” (p. 30). Performers in the circus also dressed in multicolored costumes, as men came out wearing “white ‘rubakhas’ embroidered with red, blue, and green thread and the women in colorful ‘sarafans’ and glittering ‘kokoshniks’ perched atop their heads”. Even Horace was dressed in a “midnight-blue tuxedo with tails and suede stripes... And a suede top hat” (p. 30)—which again supports the carnivalesque ideas which allow people to act in bizarre ways and wear unconventional costumes, finding it a tool for people to express themselves freely.

The grotesque, another essential carnivalesque feature, manifests in the circus's eccentric characters and performances. Grotesque realism includes the strange, the monstrous, and the marginalized. Kerr (2009) delineates that "The grotesque also incorporates the ugly and the bizarre, the diseased and horrific processes of decay and death" (p. 97). The circus has two strong men with bodies that are so huge and different from normal people; these men "could lift two-hundred-pound barbells like they were bags of feathers"; and also a very skinny young girl with a magical voice and "Some kind of skin condition she was born with. She's been sleeping on the corn sacks in the back. Her mama's dead. Her daddy doesn't want her. She just sleeps there, sweeps the floors, and sings. All day long" (p. 31). Horace sees such performers as profitable attractions. For Bakhtin, grotesque realism challenges normative aesthetics and offers a renewed perception of reality by affirming life's fluidity and the relative nature of existence.

The World of Wonders serves as both a shelter for outsiders who are seeking wonder and spectacle by watching, learning, and being a part of extraordinary performances, and also a stage-like environment for Lena's journey of personal growth and self-discovery of her identity and place in the world in spite of her disability. It also reveals the darkness of the war, emphasizing the self-discovery and resilience of the characters as they navigate their challenges along with the war destroying their world as they know it. The World of Wonders is considered to be not only a physical space with a circus-like atmosphere but also a metaphor for the characters' internal journeys of identity, love, courage, resilience, and self-discovery. It shines on themes of illusion and reality, and how characters can create their own magic even in the darkest of times.

Parikh sets her novel in the heart of the circus, giving the audience a sense of magic but with a more complex tone, as she is deeply after the question of identity and one's place in a rapidly changing world. Spending most of her life in a wheelchair, and growing up traveling across Europe in a moving circus train, it was obvious from the first glimpse that Lena would be different from other people and kids her age living in that environment. And with this difference, humans' pursuit of identity is magnified. As for the case of *The Circus Train's* heroine, Lena, who "didn't believe in magic. At least, not the kind that thrilled people who came out in droves to watch the World of Wonders, night after night" (p. 53). Despite sharing daily life with her community, Lena's disability sets her apart: "they ate the same food, slept in the same carriages, and enjoyed the same music, Lena's disability had taught her a harsh truth: she was different, and people didn't like different" (p. 54). The more Lena grows, the less she relates to the world around her. Instead, she spends the majority of her time reading books and fantasizing about a different world than the one she is living in. Lena also got to learn more than a few things about science and medicine in which she has found her real passion, Lena started slowly to know the names of arteries, muscles and veins "that snaked through the human body" (p. 56) when other children could practice tightrope walking and card shuffling. When she grew older, she developed the ability to recall various home remedies and began recording recipes for tonics in a small leather notebook she kept beside her bed.

The very identity of Lena is dependent on the father's role in the organization of the circus whose claims of being "the greatest illusionist in the world" (p. 54) are widely recognized. Lena, internally, and sometimes even externally, struggles with the fact that the world sees her father as a giant first and she, possibly, as the next smaller attraction. These are not the only reasons for her to mistake herself for a minor character in the story and, thus, confirm her desire for the self-definition of which no other descriptions will ever be needed apart from that of the main attraction's daughter or simply a disabled person. The conflict between Lena's disability and her father's overprotective attitude leads her to a gradual realization of the need for independence. Lena's acknowledgment of her disability as not being the only defining factor about her is one of the milestones in her journey through the story. And while her father's tricks are grounded in illusion, Lena's strength is in her drive, sharp mind, creativity, and persistence.

The finding of an orphan who gets onto the train during World War II early years is one of the most significant moments of the novel that helps Lena to discover her unique identity and personality. His coming marks the beginning of Lena's new life, as he makes her realize that she only has the power to create a new life and future for her. Through the connection with Alexandre and his conviction of her capabilities that go beyond her impairment, Lena uncovers strength, bravery, and an aim for life. This tie ups pushes her to lose the shackles of her father and the periphery of society and look for her own way of living. In the end, the relation of Alexandre and Lena works for the betterment of both of them. Alexandre has been a part of Lena's life and has helped her to fight off the feeling of being cut off from others, while on the other hand, Lena has been a source of family and root for Alexandre; they both have gotten a support network in each other.

V. FINDINGS

The paper attempts to apply Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque by studying Parikh's novel, *The Circus Train* (2022). It connects different carnivalistic features to the prevailing mood of the novel and the remarkable social arrangement of a moving circus train while also touching upon the main themes of human nature and identity during a carnival-like journey at the edge of war. Lena, a handicapped girl and the main illusionist's daughter, is depicted as being locked in a world both literally and metaphorically. She is a character who is on the one hand fully aware of her identity, while on the other hand, the chaos happening around her does not silence her voice of being, nor does it hinder her fight for independence, and leading her life. This research manifests how the carnivalesque feature in the text addresses wider issues of identity and self-realization. The author emphasizes the mental and emotional aspects of the

characters- especially Lena, concluding that identity is very close to human nature and that the struggle for self-understanding fosters resilience and serves as a catalyst for personal development and growth even during hard times.

VI. CONCLUSION

Bakhtin posits that the carnival is such a space where everyone is considered on the same level, where they can make their voices heard without restriction and engage in behaviors which are totally opposite to what is regarded as the norm. Bakhtinian carnivalesque takes as its main characteristics the logic of exaggeration, the laughter, the absurdity, and the complete existence of the normal behavior traces being the natural order of the logic and the conventional norms being such that they are out of their place in the carnival. This paper focused on the fundamental aspects of the carnival festival and grotesque realism in the luxurious environment of a traveling circus depicted in *The Circus Train*. At the same time, it has also on the novel's investigation of the complex and often contradictory sides of the human condition—such as identity, trauma, and the need for acceptance—all taking place in the world of enchantment and disorder. The principal character, Lena, is not merely immobilized, but also imprisoned in a world that has no place for her true self. Her inner strength amidst the fortitude turns out to be a liberating factor for her which helps her to find her true self and her potential. Instead of still being dictated to live by other people's decisions or by the constraints that have traditionally been associated with her disability, she takes the risk of paving a road of her own. It is mainly the "carnival sense of the world" concept of Bakhtin that sparks off Lena's spiritual metamorphosis from within. The carnivalesque atmosphere of the circus, the magical and distanced realm of the circus and the rejection from others all combine to encourage her in the hardest minutes of the realization of her identity and her search for acceptance. In *The Circus Train* the carnivalesque is not merely an unsteady background for the story to unfold but rather a field of resilience, personal freedom, and identity-building which is more profound.

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