

Manifestation of the Mask in Sa'adallah Wannus' Play *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*

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Abstract

This paper tackles Sa'adallah Wannus' play *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages* as a manifestation of the playwright's employment of features of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. The paper focuses on the role of the mask as an effective tool in power relations. Mask is utilized for accomplishing various purposes. In Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, mask is related to gaiety, collectiveness and renewal. It is also related to concealment, which allows its user to shelter his nature, identity, notions, weakness or feelings. Since the mask is utilized to seek superiority or protection, it is a tool of the powerful and the powerless alike. Mask impacts power relationships, and its manipulation helps in disturbing, destabilizing or displacing them. It is also closely related to strategies of coping, survival and resistance. The paper tackles mask as a device of survival in a manner that does not aid its users to achieve any gain; the employment of mask emanates from fear and lack of proper self-esteem. Mask is portrayed in Sa'adallah Wannus' play, *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages* as a means of shelter, concealing objection to tyrannical systems, resistance to injustice and rejection of the status-quo.

Keywords

Mikhail Bakhtin, Mask, Carnival, Power Relationships, Sa'adallah Wannus, Elephant

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المخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية مسرحية "الفيل يا ملك الزمان" لسعد الله ونوس لإلقاء الضوء على استخدام ونوس لسمات الكرنفال كما عرفه ميخائيل باختين. وتعنى هذه الورقة البحثية بالدور الذي يلعبه القناع كأداة في علاقات القوى. ويستخدم القناع لتحقيق العديد من الأهداف. وطبقاً لتعريف ميخائيل باختين للكرنفال، يرتبط القناع بالبهجة والشمولية والتجدد. كما يتصل القناع بالتمويه الذي يمنح مستخدمه القدرة على إخفاء طبيعته وهويته ومفاهيمه ونقاط ضعفه وأحاسيسه. ويوظف الجانبين القوي والضعيف القناع على حد سواء كأداة؛ حيث إن مستخدمه يسعى إلى التميز أو الحماية. فإن للقناع تأثيره على علاقات القوى، بما أن توظيفه يساعد على إرباك وبلبلة تلك العلاقات وزعزعتها وإحلالها. وللقناع صلة وثيقة باستراتيجيات التأقلم والبقاء على قيد الحياة والمقاومة. ويناقش البحث القناع كأداة للبقاء على قيد الحياة، دون أن ينشد مستخدمه تحقيق أية مكاسب أو أهداف حقيقية؛ حيث إن توظيفه ينبع من الخوف والرغبة من السلطة وفقدان الثقة بالنفس. ويصور القناع في مسرحية سعد الله ونوس "الفيل يا ملك الزمان" كأداة لإخفاء معارضة الأنظمة الدكتاتورية ومقاومة الظلم ورفض الأوضاع الراهنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية

ميخائيل باختين، القناع، الكرنفال، علاقات القوى، سعد الله ونوس، الفيل يا ملك الزمان.

Introduction

This paper reads Sa'adallah Wannus' play *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages* in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival. The core discussion springs from the fact that the mask as a tool is employed by Wannus to examine the relationship between the powerful and the powerless and highlight the autocracy of the regime and subjects' submission to the status-quo. As a tool, the mask has been utilized for accomplishing a variety of targets. This is due to the multiplicity of probabilities it offers. The mask's wide range of connotations has also participated in its employment in different fields by various users worldwide. The paper examines the mask as a device employed as a shelter, concealing reality from fear of

persecution with particular focus on Sa'adallah Wannus' play *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*.

In his plays, Wannus emphasizes the political status in the Arab world as a means of projecting the corrupt atmosphere the region witnessed. He establishes the medium which would enable him to depict the impact of the mask as an effective tool in power relations. He achieves this through highlighting the “*possibilities of resistance and the realistic chances the individual may have in standing up to governmental oppression and societal pressure in the corrupt political and economic atmospheres dominating the Arab world*”⁽¹⁾. Wannus employs the mask to embody the confrontation of several characters, turning the play into a carnival, a counter-power event. In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, the tyranny of the political regimes as well as the people's submissiveness are highlighted in an attempt to place the people in an encounter with their own abject state and the boundless power the leaders have acquired. Wannus attempts to highlight the effectiveness of uniting the word of the public as a means of reinforcing their discourse and endowing it with influence and power. Wannus' objective was to build up the collective consciousness of the audience and create an awareness to help them gain an insight into the reality of their current matters. This accords with collective consciousness of Bakhtin's carnival. Commenting on one of Wannus' plays – *Mughamrat Ra's al-Mamluk Jaber – (The Adventure of Jaber's Head)*, Hamdan highlights uniting the general public in an attempt to build up a “collective awareness”. In his book *Poetics, Politics and Protest in Arab Theatre: The Bitter Cup and the Holy Rain*, Hamdan states that:

By means of the staging of the dialogic effect, Wannus tries to arouse the sense of belonging to the collective in order to develop an awareness of the common fate of his people... The objective is ... the general public in which ordinary, simple folk are the

majority, and the deepening of their collective awareness and the realization of their common destiny. ⁽²⁾

Collective consciousness, Hamdan argues, is conceived by Wannus as a means of overcoming isolation and despondency: “*We free ourselves from the despair of our isolation, and become more and more aware of our collective existence*”. ⁽³⁾ It is essential to initiate a culture of criticism and exposure in a world where humanity is devoid of dreams and where, according to Wannus, “*egocentric globalization*” and “*a totalitarian monologue without values and without a future of a new world order*” prevail. ⁽⁴⁾

In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, (1969), Wannus utilizes mask and disguise, creating an atmosphere similar to that of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, mask stands out as one of the basic elements of the carnival. The employment of mask entails other features such as dressing up, spirit of possibility, role-play, reversal of roles, shift of power, laughter and mockery of all official systems, dialogic voices, renewal and change and grotesque body. These elements are fundamental to turn the carnival into a medium that is rich in probabilities and renewal.

In that sense, Wannus succeeds in invoking the carnival spirit conceived by Bakhtin. The carnival’s spirit is altered to manifest the state of fragmentation and desolation, motivating the audience to gain more understanding and insight. Andrew Robinson states Bakhtin’s concept that, “*carnival and carnivalesque create an alternative social space that is distinguished by “freedom, equality and abundance*”. ⁽⁵⁾ Carnival is an event during which rank, ubiquitous in society of the Middle Ages, is exterminated and equality prevails. The event thus marks a moment where rebirth occurs and genuine human relationships are experienced. Bakhtin conceives that during carnival

The body is ... figured not as the individual or 'bourgeois ego' but as a growing, constantly renewed collective which is exaggerated and immeasurable. Life manifests itself not as isolated individuals but as a collective ancestral body. This is not, however, a collective order, since it is also continually in change and renewal. The self is also transgressed through practices such as masking⁽⁶⁾

Through carnival, "a positive alternative vision" is offered; "It is not simply a deconstruction of dominant culture, but an alternative way of living based on a pattern of play."⁽⁷⁾ Carnival fancies humanity structured differently: "a utopia of abundance and freedom. It eliminated barriers among people created by hierarchies, replacing it with a vision of mutual cooperation and equality. Individuals are also subsumed into a kind of lived collective body which is constantly renewed."⁽⁸⁾ Robinson comments that carnival is "the expression of latent aspects of humanity, direct contact among people (as opposed to alienation), and an eccentric refusal of social roles".⁽⁹⁾ The carnival is an occasion where masks play an essential role; they are torn off or exchanged to examine power relations and attempt to shift them. During the carnival, barriers that are strictly observed are shattered, uniting classes and strata that are otherwise set apart. Besides, rearrangement of time and space occurs in a manner that reflects their "contingency and indissolubility".⁽¹⁰⁾ All matters are "ever-changing, playful and undefined" and "Hierarchies are overturned through inversions, debasements and profanations, performed by normally silenced voices and energies".⁽¹¹⁾ Thereby "The authoritative voice of the dominant discourse loses its privilege."⁽¹²⁾ The dominant discourse is interrupted, and the voiceless gain advantage of voicing their discourse which is normally silenced and suppressed. The mask of obedience utilized by the powerless falls off, and an exchange of roles takes place. In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, the dominant discourse has always been that of the King, his favorites and his

retinue. This dominance materializes in the image of the huge animal which haunts the plebeians' lives and crushes their means of living and safety. Zakaria emerges and attempts to reject that state. He invites the commoners to select a different state and helps them request their right of being listened to and voicing their own complaints.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, the authors (Peter Stallybrass and Allon White) consider the nature of the carnival, questioning whether it is "radical or conservative". The answer to that question would determine the transformative nature of the carnival. The authors argue that "*The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects*"; even though, "*given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle.*"⁽¹³⁾ Public events, such as carnival, "*were very swiftly 'politicized' by the very attempts made on part of local authorities to eliminate them.*"⁽¹⁴⁾ In that sense "*The dialectic of antagonism frequently turned rituals into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers, even when no overt oppositional element has been present before.*"⁽¹⁵⁾ The effective impact of the carnival as a medium of change and transformation is conceived and utilized by Wannus to suggest the urgent need of altering corrupt states. According to Bakhtin, carnival is an occasion where mask is applied to effect a change that could emanate in a reversal of roles, suggesting a shift of power and an alternative life of freedom. Carnival is thereby a medium of change and renewal where all official and static forms and institutions of power are questioned and exposed. Through employing the mask, Wannus similarly involves his audience, inviting them to contemplate their state and that of the tyrannical regimes, targeting the initiation of public collective awareness that would help in uniting the people's word and entice them to reject further subjugation to exclusive

dictatorial power. Mask is thereby one of the elements that are utilized to disturb power and render it an abject discourse, since it functions as a tool of role reversal, or rather formations of new identities.

In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, dreams are sanctioned, but only within limits. It is observed, though, that the potential liberation of the rabble and the tendency to play the role of the powerful figure is found in the play. This probability of future potentialities, such as the unity of the people's word, the rejection of "elephants" that spread havoc and the emergence of leaders like Zakaria to instigate a change and rejection of slavery, recalls Bakhtin's words of the positive element of the carnival:

And this element acquires a wider and deeper meaning: it expresses the people's hopes of a happier life, of a more just and economic order, of a new truth. The gay aspect of the feast presented this happier future of a general material affluence, equality, and freedom ... Thus, the medieval feast had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal.⁽¹⁶⁾

The above quote throws light on Bakhtin's concept of the major qualities attributed to the carnival, some of which are projected in Wannus' play. Applying mask and disguise as well as dressing up, for example, possibly turns a clown into a king and vice versa. Despite being temporary, this reversal of roles and shift of power have a positive impact on participants of the event. Similarly, Wannus aims at influencing his audience through involving them in the carnival-like medium he creates.

Because of the traits of role reversal and shift of power, the carnival bears a spirit of possibility; anyone could acquire any identity; no one is bound by any limits. It is this spirit of possibility that most characterizes the carnival, as it is a moment in time in which anything could happen. This marks a break from the official forms and modes of life and a submission to the laws and codes of the carnival. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states that:

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 ... The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Bakhtin states that in the carnival the typical power relationships are thrown off, and even inverted. The reversal of roles is thus central, and it is related to the exchange of masks, even between the powerful and the powerless. In Bakhtin's view, the mask is "related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries"; it functions as a tool of role reversal, and the formations of new identities. ⁽¹⁸⁾ According to Bakhtin:

Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Most social and political relationships entail utilizing mask and disguise. The aims of employing the mask do not necessarily include actual gain; the usage of the mask could emanate from fear, oppression and lack of free will. The powerless use masks to avoid social/political criticism, marginalization, persecution, imprisonment or death. It is interesting to note that the mask is employed by the powerless as well as the powerful. The powerless hold on to the mask as a means of survival, considering it the safest strategy available at certain phases – clinging to it as a safeguard in the face of tyrannical systems, arbitrary social statuses or both. The powerful, on the other hand, utilize the mask to ensure a firm grip on the powerless and subdue them, safeguarding the perpetuation of the status-quo and securing the dominance of their discourse. Wannus employs the mask to shake off and subvert the mask of the powerful and induce the powerless to remove their mask of obedience, conquer their fears and confront their dictatorial rulers and oppressive systems.

The powerless' employment of the mask as a survival technique is highlighted by Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American novelist and short story writer, who asserts that mask was essential to the lives of indigenous cultures. Danticat argues that "*it was inevitable that in the so-called New World, we would be madly in love with masks in our own way when these cultures meet and/or clash through us*".⁽²⁰⁾ She indicates that out of "*violent encounters between these two cultures*" survivors were obliged to use mask and still do.⁽²¹⁾ She adds: "*Think of people who had to smile through pain, play music through pain, say "Yes, Sir" or "Oui, Madame" through pain*".⁽²²⁾ Danticat points out the stages tolerated to finally call for freedom: "*We wore the mask post-destruction and through slavery towards revolution*".⁽²³⁾ Danticat herself employs the mask as a tool of reminiscence: assembling parts of oneself together once more. Carnival mask, according to Danticat is a means of "*linking myth to mask*" – through which it is possible to "*transform the ordinary into the mythical*".⁽²⁴⁾ Masks in that sense "*last*

beyond the individual".⁽²⁵⁾ Similarly, Wannus illustrates that Bakhtinian mask would propose multiple probabilities, discarding official statuses and shifting boundaries, as a means of highlighting the people's common goals and voicing their discourse.

Beneath the mask reside alternative scripts that better express the true natures, attitudes, traits, notions, demands and ailments of people. In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott differentiates between two types of transcripts: "*public transcript*" and "*hidden transcript*".⁽²⁶⁾ He terms "*the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate*" "*public transcript*".⁽²⁷⁾ This interaction is generally fashioned in a manner that accords with the anticipation of the powerful. Scott argues that the public transcript will not possibly reveal the entire account of relations of power as it is customarily more convenient and advantageous for the two sides to "*tacitly conspire in misrepresentation*".⁽²⁸⁾ The powerless' attitude is marked by discreet illusive respect and compliance; in this relationship, the powerless figure attempts to oblige oneself to seem cordial, regardless of the disdain he/she might bear the powerful. The powerless are constantly conscious of the helplessness they should display to avoid wrath, persecution and hostility of the powerful. Scott argues that slaves "*wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery*".⁽²⁹⁾ Slavery is an "*aspect*" – an appearance that has to be "*worn*" in a manifestation of power that would satisfy the powerful and meet their expectations. This type of mask is employed by the powerless as a shield beneath which reality exists. For subordinate groups, controlling and concealing actual impressions and feelings through the mask is a central survival strategy. Scott argues that the wider the power discrepancy between the dominant and the subordinate, and the "*more arbitrarily*" it is practiced, "*the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast*": i.e., "*the more menacing the power, the thicker the*

mask”.⁽³⁰⁾ In Wannus’ play, the plebeians automatically put on a mask that accords with the public transcript and expresses their expected role as slaves to their master. They fail to reveal their real needs and sufferings in a manner that not only sustains but also aggravates their misery. The positive impact of the carnival is lost in this context preventing role reversal and shift of power.

In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, Wannus skillfully criticizes autocratic systems along with the presumed authority and aura of magnificence that surround the ruler as well as anything and anyone that pertain to him. The entire play offers a mockery of the attitude and reaction of the people upon approaching the King’s castle, or the mere suggestion of taking that action. It is not possible to disconnect the play from its historical milieu. *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages* was written in 1969 at the time when the Arab world suffered from tyrannical regimes. Wannus was keen on highlighting the autocracy of the ruling systems and the outcome of submissiveness. He delineates an artistic image of the dominance and destruction of authority, which he craftily symbolizes by the formidable elephant that creates chaos everywhere. The King is portrayed as a tyrant who is alienated from his subjects. He is entirely oblivious of the people’s needs or even existence, although they are the ones who have granted him exclusive authority. The King has turned his subjects into slaves, leading miserable lives and lacking any will of resisting being crushed.

The plebeians use the mask in the play, encountering the king in a manner that does not lead to achieving actual gain or advantage of any kind, but – ironically – it results in adding further misery and oppression to the commoners’ own tragic lives. The people’s low esteem of their own worth and value as well as their exaggerated esteem of the godlike figure of the King drive them to shield behind a mask of satisfaction with their forlorn state. Their fear and fascination upon entering the palace immediately defeat

them in advance – even before the discourse with the King starts. Prior to going into the palace, the people are defeated by the feeling of their own inferiority: they lack proper self-esteem. They perceive of themselves as helpless slaves, who are voiceless in the discourse of power. They find it difficult even to imagine that they could approach the king or talk to him; to them, entering the palace seems to be a grand matter they do not feel they have either the power or the right to claim. Zakaria's initial proposal that they should meet the king shocks them as they find it difficult to realize that this could actually happen. They are indeed defeated at the encounter with the King, inverting the positive vision that Bakhtin attributes to mask. Whereas carnival mask proposes an alternative perspective of life in which roles are reversed and power is shifted, the mask employed by the people adds to their misery and intensifies their state of servitude.

It is noteworthy, though, that the mask is also employed by the king and his retinue. Whatever is displayed is not only strictly controlled, but also scrutinized to maintain a conformity to the expected public performance of the ruling elite. The powerful are keen on employing the mask for maintaining an image of figures that are superior, gaining legitimacy to preserve their seemingly eligible extravagant prerogatives and unlimited knowledge.

The mask manifests in other forms – namely the elephant, which is used as a symbolic mask of power; it is a type of power imposed upon the plebeians in an oppressing manner. The fact that the King's elephant is granted absolute freedom to wander around without restraint emphasizes the autocratic status Wannus aims to convey. The elephant's unquestionable and unjustifiable acts symbolize the limitless authority given to the King's favorites. Despite the manner in which the elephant crushes the commoners' lives and livelihood, none of them could even think of proposing an enquiry about it or complain about its intrusion. It is an embodiment of corrupt

unrestrained powers which intrude on the powerless' existence and turn their lives into a series of tragedies. Being too scared to advance any true illustration of the actuality of their miserable lives and the violations they are tolerating, the subjects conceal their anger and frustration behind the mask of submission, inverting the positive impact of the carnival into a negative one. Wannus puts the elephant into a larger context, where its impact transcends the tyrannical image to the creation of destruction. The elephant's obtrusion aggravates the devastating state of the plebeians who surprisingly start to express their protest which they have been concealing behind the mask of submissiveness. They start expressing their hidden transcript: "*Not a day passes but we see it doing some kind of damage*".⁽³¹⁾ Zakaria adds: "*We haven't had a single day's happiness since it started wandering around the city*".⁽³²⁾ The elephant is released with "*no keeper, no restraints*".⁽³³⁾ It has smashed the little son of Muhammad al-Fahd (one of the commoners), and it daily crushes a new victim. It has sabotaged the commoners' fields and palm-trees, trampled the lamb of one of the plebeians and torn down another's house. Fortunately, according to one of the men, the family that lives in that house has escaped an inevitable death: "*At least they still have something of their lives left. If they'd been indoors, it would have been a much bigger tragedy*".⁽³⁴⁾ In such an environment, where the imprudent are given exclusive power, fleeing catastrophic death has become one of the forlorn people's aspirations. The accidents taking place because of the elephant are symbolic of depriving the commoners of even the little they have and of life itself.

The plebeians' attempted encounter with the king results from being exploited for too long. People have suffered for years from poverty, taxes, disease, oppression and forced labor. They fully recognize their desolate existence, mentioning that "*Tragedies are always with us ... They nest in our homes like mice*".⁽³⁵⁾ They are helpless and hopeless, and all they could afford to do is to bewail their "*absolutely intolerable*" situation.⁽³⁶⁾ They

lament their “*fate*” by enlisting the miseries they pass through: “*Poverty and punishment ... Oppression and forced labour ... Disease Famine ... Taxes beyond our meagre earnings*”.⁽³⁷⁾ The appearance of the elephant gives rise to the action, as it crushes the plebeians’ last hope for survival – even under the severe circumstances they are experiencing and tolerating. The elephant’s transgression emphasizes its image as a mask of power, as this stands for limitless unquestionable authority granted to favorites. The people have started fearing for their own existence and the existence of their children. The injustice and suppression that the people have been subjected to for years have eventually led to indignation and outrage: attempts of expressing their hidden transcript are triggered by the young boy’s horrible death. At this point, Zakaria intervenes to express their true desires without further masking.

The gathering of commoners in an alley to narrate the boy’s tragedy recalls some of the elements of the carnival: the public space and the collective consciousness. Yet these elements are reversed once more. In Bakhtin’s carnival, the plebeians’ gatherings are characterized by breaking off all official systems and norms, generating a medium of probabilities where role reversal and shift of power take place. However, these traits are inverted by Wannus, as the commoners seem helpless and bewildered without the remotest idea which action to take. Despair and misery govern their words and behavior; all they can do is mourn, wail, weep, complain or beat their chests. These actions echo, in a reversed manner, the public’s unrestrained attitude and freedom of expression in the carnival, which entail the carnivalesque element of laughter and mockery of all that is official. When a little girl innocently enquires if the elephant will be punished, the answer of one of the men reflects total submissiveness to the tyrannical King, asserting it is beyond punishment: “*Who can punish the king’s elephant?*”⁽³⁸⁾ Despite the horrible conditions the people are living,

“*Nobody dares say anything*”.⁽³⁹⁾ Feeling helpless, the people utter desperate complaints, which seem like a refrain repeating their morbid state. They always mention God, seeking Him as a source of power that may interfere to put an end to all their catastrophes. One of the women submissively utters: “*It’s Fate*”, yielding to the status-quo.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Wannus depicts subjects who follow the typical norm expected from the powerless to their masters – as Scott puts it: “*the public performance required of those subject to elaborate and systematic forms of social subordination: ... the slave to the master ... a member of a subject race to one of the dominant race*”.⁽⁴¹⁾ The people’s words reflect powerlessness and impuissance; these words are the people’s hidden transcript, in which they freely express all their misery, anxiety and apprehension. It is an attempt to speak up, voicing their ailment, distress and misery. So far, though, this hidden transcript is pronounced in secrecy and with great prudence, maintaining a mask that only displays satisfaction and content. Apprehension and low self-esteem have silenced the people and imposed the mask as a means of shelter. Zakaria appears to entice people to strip that mask off and face the powerful tyrant with the people’s grievances and miseries. Even though, Zakaria’s endeavors are quelled, since the people persistently apply the mask of obedience, furthering their ordeal and rejecting the possibility of expressing their true identity hiding beneath the mask. The carnivalesque element of probability, which accompanies employing the mask and emanates in role reversal and shift of power, is missing here. The metamorphosis of the commoners is a negative one: they become more enslaved and repressed.

Through the role of Zakaria, Wannus attempts to highlight the effectiveness of uniting the word of the public as a means of reinforcing their discourse and endowing it with influence and power. This is done by tutoring the audience to build up a collective awareness. With Zakaria’s appearance, some hope emerges, as he acts as an instigator, attempting to recruit the people and help them visualize their abject condition. Zakaria

tears off the mask of submission the commoners are applying to guide them to see the truth and the proper action to be taken. He also invites them to sneak behind the mask of their tyrant ruler to initiate a discourse where exclusive power becomes questionable and the rights of the subjects are voiced. Zakaria proposes some action to confront the disastrous situation: “*We’ll all go and make our complaint to the King. We’ll explain to him what has been happening and ask him to keep his elephant’s destructiveness away from us*”.⁽⁴²⁾ Zakaria recognizes the importance of uniting the people’s will and word. He also realizes the effectiveness of discourse that is built on awareness and accompanied by determination and vision. Nevertheless, the people’s “voices” respond in total confusion and apprehension: Zakaria’s words shock them. In the power relation that has prevailed between the mighty King and his obedient subjects, the dominant discourse has constantly been that of the King. Thus the subjects find it astounding how they would dare take such a grave action as even approaching the King’s palace: “*Who are we to talk to Kings?*”⁽⁴³⁾ The people are always underestimating themselves, since they have always been demeaned by their King and his retinue: “*They won’t let us near him*”.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The King’s guards and retinue have similarly exercised extreme power over the enslaved people. The people’s subjugation has driven them to be in constant fear of the King’s wrath – even if what’s at stake is life itself: “*He may get angry, and then God alone knows our fate*”.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The exaggeration in delineating the King’s image and the people’s excessive apprehension and reverence indicate that the people regard him as a demi-god, not merely a king. The people’s discourse constantly turns into separate voices, hubbub or uproar, and Zakaria always attempts to reunite and organize these voices through supplying them with a clear vision of their common target and the means of achieving it. He stresses the fact that each person is directly involved in the catastrophic events, if not at present, then in the future, he/she would be.

The elephant poses a potential threat for every individual, and no one knows who would be its next victim: “*If things go on like this, each of us will have his turn mourning for a child, or being mourned by his family*”.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In this manner, Zakaria attempts once more to unite the people, raise their collective consciousness and voice their hidden transcript with all its suppressed pain, suffering and demands. Wannus aspires for creating an environment similar to the carnival’s, where the public have no fears or constraints and live an alternative life away from the official life governed by tyrannical systems and norms.

Zakaria’s attempt to speak up is not merely an expression of his own hidden transcript that he has been hiding behind the mask of submissiveness and complacency. The script Zakaria rehearses with the people is the first “*public declaration*” which Scott has pointed to.⁽⁴⁷⁾ These words are no longer an individual expression but an outburst of an entire oppressed marginalized people. The words Zakaria trains the plebeians to utter are simple, yet they are a paramount step in unifying everyone’s word, determination and objective:

Zakaria: ... “The elephant, Oh Lord of Ages ...

The Crowd: (The voices are beginning to show more coordination.) Killed Muhammad al-Fahd’s son. It trampled him in the street and his body was turned to a paste mixed with mud.

Zakaria: The elephant, Oh Lord of Ages...

The Crowd: Nearly killed Abu Muhammad Hisan a few days ago. To this day he’s still confined to his bed.

Zakaria: The elephant, Oh Lord of Ages...

The Crowd: Knocked down the palm-trees. Only the ones planted long ago survive.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The list of grievances seems endless, echoing the suppressed discourse – the hidden transcript – of the plebeians. The audition Zakaria monitors is significant, since it is the first attempt to systematically unite the people's word, articulating their discourse and creating a positively effective awareness. The alarming fact the words express is that the commoners have been deprived of security – one essential requirement of life for which they had accepted being stripped of almost all their rights:

Third Woman: (Standing out from the rest.) There's no security.

The Crowd: Our houses, our lives. It's not safe. There's no security. It's not safe. There's no security.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Zakaria calls for uniting the voices to create an impact:

Zakaria: Our voices must all be in unison so we can get our message across to the King. By Allah. And we...

The Crowd: And we, the poor, the citizens of this city, have come to complain. We beg a fair deal from the King. Life has become very difficult for us. Life has become very difficult for us. (Confusion and discord spread.)⁽⁵⁰⁾

Although the words of the commoners have been rehearsed, they still need more elaboration, for they have not gained the required eloquence and organization; nevertheless, the potential significance of these words lies in the fact that they mark the first attempt to put forth “*a declaration that breaches the etiquette of power relations [breaking] an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, [carrying] the force of a symbolic declaration of war*”.⁽⁵¹⁾ What Zakaria has been trying to organize is the people's initial endeavor to speak the truth to power. He realizes the vital importance of uniting the plebeians' voices (word):

Zakaria: *“(Waving his hands in protest.) We're a long way from getting it right the way we need to. If we don't shout with one voice, if our words are not well-organised and clear, the King won't understand what we want. He won't do anything or have any sympathy for us. This isn't just one man's complaint. It's the complaint of all of us. We must speak it with one voice, one mind.”*⁽⁵²⁾

Zakaria's trial marks a difference, since it aims at interrupting the long-lasting domination of a discourse and finding a place for another; as one of the women notes: *“This is someone who dares to speak up”*.⁽⁵³⁾ The people's words still lack the gaiety and unity of the carnival. The impact of the words would be effective only in case they reveal the commoners' true identity that is shielded behind the mask of submissiveness.

The plebeians' words are repeatedly enunciated, recited and rehearsed in private among the voiceless subordinates. The confrontation has been imagined over and over, yet it has never been openly stated. This hidden transcript has remained personal – never finding its way to public expression: excessive fear and underestimation have tied people's will and ability of speech. Eventually, catastrophic events have led the people to attempt breaking through the borders of official boundaries imposed on them and established through tyranny and oppression. The horrible manner in which the young boy is crushed to meet his end is the final stroke that compels people to request being listened to. The duration of miserable lives has emanated in the people's insight into their status: their *“common class position and their social links ... provided a powerful resolving lens bringing their collective hidden transcript into focus”*.⁽⁵⁴⁾ All these demands and protests are determined by offstage culture that the hidden transcript has privately originated and fostered. Each of these subjects has probably personally developed a *“personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation”*, yet it's only at the time that the insult turns into *“a variant of affronts suffered*

systematically by a whole race, class, or strata" that "*the fantasy can become a collective cultural product*".⁽⁵⁵⁾ All forms of offstage collective activities or aspirations are requisite to "*any dynamic view of power relations*".⁽⁵⁶⁾ Free expression and vitality found in the spirit of Bakhtin's carnival are required as an essential element of gaining the required assertiveness, shattering official barriers and aspiring for change and rebirth.

Contrary to the carnival's spirit, the people in *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages* frequently fall into ultimate despair – an attitude that is rejected by Wannus, who invites his audience to contemplate this state. The commoners start telling tales of the great love and high esteem the King has for the elephant. The discourse shifts to an overstatement of how special the elephant is to the King, to the extent that, "*He spoils it as if it were his son or Minister ... He's been seen feeding it with his own hands ... He supervises its bath ... the guards play it tunes ... Its wishes are commands and its deeds are law ...*".⁽⁵⁷⁾ The exaggeration of the people's words is rejected by Zakaria: "*That's just sensationalism*".⁽⁵⁸⁾ It is remarkable that the people's discourse is full of tales about what is being said or what they have heard, not what they actually see: "*He's been seen ... I've heard ...*"⁽⁵⁹⁾ In a clear distinction between illusion and reality, Zakaria highlights the difference in the manner of obtaining information: hearing about facts and seeing them; he enquires: "*Which of you has seen the King feeding the elephant with his own hands? ... In actual fact, not one of you ... But you're sensationalizing things*".⁽⁶⁰⁾ Seeing makes matters credible, since they appear without exaggeration as they are in real life; hearing, on the other hand, allows too much space for the working of fantasy and imaginative tales. Through this alienation, the image of the King and all that pertain to him maintain superiority and dominance. This alienation is a mask that commoners are required to tear off to get to the core of reality and attempt altering the status-quo.

The form of domination delineated in *The Elephant! Oh Lord of Ages* is one that relies on a kind of extravagant display where public performance has its own characteristics to sustain a glamorous image of the King, and all that is related to him. The King and the ruling elites' hidden transcript is securely concealed behind fake masks from any public observation or vision. The plebeians talk about their king and the palace as if they are recounting fairy tales. Some give accounts of the king's retinue, palace and habits, but they all depend on hearsay they have managed to learn about from "authentic" sources. Such stories seem like fanciful ones that the public highly treasure and esteem as is the case of legends of heroes and warriors. This manner creates a highly revered or even sacred image of the powerful. Scott argues that, "*Those forms of domination based on a premise or claim to inherent superiority by ruling elites would seem to depend heavily on lavish display, sumptuary laws, regalia, and public acts of deference or tribute by subordinates*".⁽⁶¹⁾ The main target of these practices is "[*inculcating*] *habits of obedience and hierarchy*".⁽⁶²⁾ Exaggerated stances include excessive display and performance, where the ruler's public performance and manifestation would be "*so minutely choreographed that he [would become] virtually a living icon deployed in rituals that [risk] nothing to improvisation*".⁽⁶³⁾ In *The Elephant! Oh Lord of Ages*, the technique is effective: the King's appearance before his subjects is exaggerated and rarely occurs, and his contact with his subjects is "*ritualized*" – securing the masks of both parties and reducing the hazard of overexposure or occasional unfavorable acts and manifestations.

It is noteworthy that all the characters in the play are not given names, but only description of their identities: "First Man", "First Woman", "Little Girl", "The Guard", "The King", ... etc. This makes them universal, and it is easy to relate to these individuals as people who are deprived of all their rights and identity. Lack of names also deprives plebeians of their subjectivity. None of them has anything to individualize him/her or make

any of them distinct. The only character given a name is Zakaria whom Wannus distinguishes from all the others, as he is the only one who possess a clear vision and determination to propose action and effect a change. He daringly mobilizes the crowd and encourages the people to seek means for saving themselves from their horrifying condition and the regime's haughtiness and tyranny. Zakaria's performance is one of the "rare, but significant, exceptions" that do not comply with what is generally expected from the powerless towards the powerful. ⁽⁶⁴⁾ He reminds the people that they have nothing more to lose "Is there any worry greater than the worry you have every moment of the day for your life, your children, your property?" ⁽⁶⁵⁾ Furthermore, Zakaria shows distinct perception as he realizes the lack of harmony in the people's discourse and their need to rehearse in order to manage uniting it: "Then let's get everyone together in the Square. We'll work out what we're going to say and then we'll go on to the Palace". ⁽⁶⁶⁾ Indeed, Wannus allots a whole scene the title "The Drill", in an obvious indication of the need for training to unite the people's discourse; hence, these words appear during the rehearsal: "inarticulate, confused, mumbling, together, one voice, no confusion, more coordination, unison, confusion and discord, not well-organised and clear, one voice, one mind, muddled voices". ⁽⁶⁷⁾ Besides, a major concern that defeats the people is the fear of losing their voices: "We'll lose our voices". ⁽⁶⁸⁾ This state of lack of self-confidence and coordination as well as excessive fear contrasts the boisterous, wild and united manner in which the public behave during the carnival. The dialogic voices in the carnival freely express the public's discourse, break from all official norms and subject every official aspect of life to mockery.

The plebeians, who have been compelled to "act a mask", finally realize that "their faces have grown to fit that mask". ⁽⁶⁹⁾ According to Scott, "The practice of subordination in this case produces, in time, its own legitimacy,

rather like Pascal's injunction to those who were without religious faith but who desired it to get down on their knees five times a day to pray, and the acting would eventually engender its own justification in faith".⁽⁷⁰⁾ The mask hides forms of objection, dissatisfaction and subjectivity. The public act like supplicants or worshipers of a god. The King's image as a godlike figure manifests in various ways. The people themselves barely find it possible to imagine approaching the king's palace and requesting to talk to him: "*Who are we to talk to Kings? ... There's no harm in complaining, even if it doesn't get us anywhere. He may get angry, and then God alone knows our fate. (The voices start to separate, one from the other)*".⁽⁷¹⁾ The commoners are alienated from their godlike ruler's presence. He has been surrounded by an aura of splendor and grandeur for years, as a god who is worshiped at a distance; approaching him, his palace or his retinue is a taboo, as if the palace is a sanctuary. As the plebeians enter the palace, things get worse. The guards start treating them as worthless *persona non grata*, warning them against any actions that do not accord with slaves', or worshipers' behavior in the presence of their god. One of the guards allows them to enter the palace, but his words are "*Full of disdain*" and "*Contempt*".⁽⁷²⁾ He gives undermining instructions: "*But before you may enter, clean your shoes properly, and brush your clothes so we don't have any lice or fleas dropping off you*".⁽⁷³⁾ He also orders them: "*come in in a disciplined and respectful manner. Make sure you don't touch anything. Remember that you aren't on your own dung-heap but in the Palace of the King*".⁽⁷⁴⁾ The subjects, who are already defeated by sense of inferiority, continuously act in an apologetic subdued manner. They "*start unconsciously brushing their shoes and dusting down their clothes*".⁽⁷⁵⁾ With this submissive mask, the plebeians resume their roles as subjects to their master. The complaint they have come to forward is entirely overshadowed by their apprehension and low self-esteem. Unlike the spirit of the carnival, the commoners' behavior reflects self-defeat and failure to

express themselves. Thus reversal of roles and shift of power accompanying the employment of the mask do not work out in Wannus' play. The metamorphosis is a negative one, lacking all possibility of shifting the power relationship in the plebeians' favor.

Even Zakaria, who seems to be the most outspoken and the bravest of the group, submissively answers, "*Don't worry. Have no fear. We'll meet your highest expectations as far as discipline and respect are concerned*".⁽⁷⁶⁾ Although Zakaria is the most promising of the commoners, he always acts humbly and directs the others to abide by discipline and maintain the same attitude. Like the commoners, he is overcome in the discourse of power; he directs the commoners: "*We've got to be on our best behaviour. We are now among very well-disciplined circles. We bow showing every respect. Then after that we present the King with our complaints*".⁽⁷⁷⁾ All the plebeians act as if they are part of a herd, being constantly directed and subdued. Zakaria is conscious of his state and that of the commoners. He, therefore, assumes the manner and attitude expected from the powerless in the presence of a mighty tyrant. Wannus delineates the subjects in this manner to shock the audience into realizing their own abject state, raising public consciousness to convince them of the necessity of acting collectively. He thus targets raising the public awareness of the corruption of tyrannical rule and the consequences of surrendering to it. The attitude of the commoners is set in contrast to that of participants in the carnival with its unrestrained excessive expression of all that is unofficial and the mockery of official forms of life.

The guard's command to the plebeians: "*keep your voices down*" creates an irony in that situation.⁽⁷⁸⁾ The people's voices have already been suppressed for years, and they are just attempting to find chances of being heard. The strict command is symbolic of the people's defeat – being ordered to remain voiceless – even before seeing the King. Additionally, the commoners' faces show signs of "*Apprehension, anxiety and*

awkwardness".⁽⁷⁹⁾ As they proceed into the King's palace, their infatuation with the palace and the King multiplies. They seem like worshipers approaching their god's shrine and overpowered by this mighty event. The plebeians exclaim: "*We'll see the throne and its glory ... my heart's beating ... The walls sparkle like sunlight ...*"⁽⁸⁰⁾ Overwhelmed by awe and anxiety, the people behold their King – a grand matter for them: "*The King with his sceptre in his hand. A light like the sun. Keep your heads down. The guards are like spirits ... The throne is huge. The King sparkles like a comet ... Features are frozen ...*"⁽⁸¹⁾ By that moment, the plebeians seem to have already forgotten the reason for being in the palace. They no longer remember their cause: the ailments they endure and the injustice they have been subjected to. All they see at that moment is the glamour and mightiness of the King and his surroundings. They instantly assume the role of worshipers in the presence of their god. The mask of obedience and submission, beneath which the people have concealed objection to injustice and rejection of tyranny, is employed once more. The transformative nature of the mask indicated by Bakhtin is present here; it is inverted, though. Wannus employs the mask but purposely reverses its effect into a negative one to shock his audience, help them realize their abject state and tutor them.

The people's defeat by the King's grandeur has started before going into the palace. Part of this defeat derives from being devalued and undermined for years, thereby becoming accustomed to their inferior state. Another factor for the people's defeat is the disdainful attitude of the guards. Finally, the actual presence in the Palace and approaching the King have their immense impact on the people. The people are infatuated and intimidated by the idea of being in the Palace and in the King's presence: "*My knees are knocking ... I've started sweating ... We're walking through a tunnel of gold*".⁽⁸²⁾ Despite the horrific circumstances they are living in, the plebeians instantly forget about their complaints and become enchanted by the Palace,

considering being in it “*dazzling ... an awesome experience*”.⁽⁸³⁾ The Palace is likened to a “*labyrinth*”, to indicate the feelings of loss, infatuation and apprehension that overcome the plebeians as they proceed through it.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The glory of palace negatively impacts the commoners. This setting is set in contrast to the carnival’s open square where the public are given limitless freedom to express themselves. In Wannus’ play, the element of fear multiplies as the commoners approach the King’s “*shrine*”. The guards, whose number increases as the people advance the King, become a source of intimidation: they are “*strict*” and “*fierce*”, with faces “*made of flint or of stone*”, and killing for them “*is as easy as yawning*”.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Calling the people “*riff-raff*”, the Guard orders the people: “*Lower your heads and enter*”.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The people’s discourse reflects a crushed identity even prior to meeting the King. The people’s urgent demands and their desperate need for safety are gradually being marginalized and diminished. The encounter with the King lacks all vitality and assertiveness of the carnival.

Stricken by “*awe and anxiety*”, the people forget all about their rights and complaints, and in “*Dry-throated and quaking*” voices, they are transformed into worshipers idolizing the King; their “*Features are frozen. Fear has turned to a cold silence. Everybody lowers their heads ... [walking] with heavy footsteps, making the deepest of bows*”.⁽⁸⁷⁾ The entire discourse is turned into the favor of the King, crushing all people’s hopes of change or even survival. The collective awareness Zakaria has been endeavoring to build up is destroyed and the only voice who manages to speak up as Zakaria requests the people to do is soon “*stifled and speaker looks around in terror*”.⁽⁸⁸⁾ In an innocent manner, the Little Girl attempts to speak up, but her initiative is aborted by her mother who “*desperately puts her hand over the girl’s mouth, telling her to shut up*”.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Zakaria, “*Distressed and angry*”, despairingly seeks to reunite the people’s voices by raising his voice and repeating the statement they have rehearsed.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Due to

the people's apprehension and fear, they are transformed, and their representative – Zakaria – finds that the only option he has is to be transformed too to avoid the King's wrath. Helpless, Zakaria "*looks hard at the people, disdainfully and desperately ... he hesitates and then his face transforms*".⁽⁹¹⁾ The metamorphosis that occurs to Zakaria recalls the transformative element of the carnival. It is a negative one, though. This inversion is done by Wannus to set in contrast the positive and negative impact of transformation as a means of highlighting the grave error committed by the subjects, who add to their own misery by constant submission and surrender. In an attempt to avoid the King's wrath, Zakaria takes on a mask, claiming love of the elephant: "*We love the elephant, Oh Lord of Ages. Like you, Sire, we love and cherish him*".⁽⁹²⁾ Zakaria's claim that the people demand the marriage of the elephant is an obvious contradiction of their actual complaint: the disastrous presence and transgression of the elephant and the essential need of ridding the people of that creature. The claim of another elephant is as issuing an actual death penalty for all the commoners, whose condition is aggravated by the presence of another elephant, adding further danger to their lives and livelihood. Wannus extends the image of the elephant to allude to multiplicity of influential and rich people who crush the lives, hopes and will of the voiceless in the discourse of power.

In *The Elephant, Oh Lord of Ages*, the discourse of the people has eventually fallen into the expected norm. Scott notes that, "*With rare, but significant, exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful*".⁽⁹³⁾ The open interaction between the subjects and their rulers – "*public transcript*" – "*is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations*".⁽⁹⁴⁾ The powerful and the powerless find it "*frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation*"; the powerless would exhibit "*prudent and misleading*

deference".⁽⁹⁵⁾ The people thus display a façade that entirely contrasts the "*hidden transcript*", which is developed as "*thick and resilient*" and "*is favored by the existence of social and cultural barriers between dominant elites and subordinates*".⁽⁹⁶⁾ Having concealed their true identity, the people project a fake one: "*In its most striking form, an entire ersatz facade may be erected in order to shield another reality from detection*".⁽⁹⁷⁾ The people and Zakaria put on a mask, advancing an entirely different petition from the one they have initially come to the Palace seeking to forward. The mask, ironically saves them from the King's rage, but it totally deprives them from their hopes and determination and makes their lives constantly subjected to extreme danger.

The voices of the people lack coordination and unity. Wannus makes use of the people's voice to reflect their division and lack of confidence. In contrast to the world of the carnival, the people lack belonging to a collective consciousness. Whereas the discourse in Bakhtin's carnival is one that expresses ultimate freedom and unites the people in a collective identity, the discourse in Wannus' play is characterized by an imposed wholeness that lacks harmony, strength or freedom – it is a wholeness of dictated totality of the submissive subjects. They thus lack self-assurance and gaiety. Their life is a serious tragedy where miserable events constantly strike their doors and pull down their houses, crushing them – or even any hope of maintaining the slightest basic needs of life. They constantly select the mask of submissiveness and servitude, concealing their actual discourse to avoid the indignation of the King and his retinue.

In his play, Wannus depicts subjects who have come close to speaking the truth to power. The endeavors of Zakaria have not succeeded to achieve their target, but they might initiate some hope. Despite the total passivity of the people, the awful manner through which the child meets his death instigates some reaction from the downtrodden people. Although their

attempt is eventually aborted, the plebeians seem to have at least recognized the path upon which they need to stabilize their march. Wannus' message is clear: the people are in great need of defeating their fear, dismantling the masks of submissiveness they have been utilizing and encountering the reality of the tyrannical regime, their miserable conditions and their yielding nature. To convey his message, Wannus propagates building up a collective consciousness and a political awareness. The mask of the plebeians does not redress their plight, nor their violated right; it has only augmented their subdued status. Unfortunately, the people, who have a low esteem of themselves and an exaggerated high esteem of their King, end their encounter and discourse with him by adding further misery to their lives, since they regard him as a demigod whose authority and aura of grandeur are unquestionable.

Conclusion

It thus becomes obvious that the use of the mask mainly results from the need to put up façades that conceal real feelings, opinions or impressions and project more favorable and secure ones. This is done for different targets that vary from merely seeking protection or avoiding persecution to gaining power and authority. In power relationships, masks are constantly employed for balancing power and maintaining the status-quo. This could persist for intervals of time until a moment of revelation erupts. Only then could power relations be inverted or at least disturbed. The mask is used by the subordinate group as a shield to conceal behind until the appropriate moment comes. The dominant group, on the other hand, employs the mask to conserve an image that would allow the elite to remain in their domineering powerful position via suppressing any attempts of their subjects that target reversing roles. Wannus subtly introduces the carnival medium where the mask plays a major role. The effect, however, is negative. This topsy-turvy manifestation is used to indicate the urgent need

of tearing off masks of docility and expressing the actual discourse of long-lasting injustice and torture imposed upon a downtrodden people. Wannus' technique also targets dismantling the regime and exposing its autocracy, corruption and apathy.

Endnotes

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