

‘Better a Witty Fool than a Foolish Wit’- Who are these Fools?



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ABSTRACT: The paper focuses on the most remarkable personality was and is seen in the dramas and plays on stages around the world, “The Jokers”. They had played a vital role, connecting the characters in a play and the audience with the play. Though they were portrayed differently in different traditions around the world, their sole purpose was to break the fourth wall in the theatre. Are they ‘witty fools or foolish wits’? is the question debated in the paper. Whatever they are called, they were inevitable as the purpose is to bring entertainment combined with wisdom. Knowledge and humour were their strong power they inherited which was making them special, hence some cultures worshiped them and feared too. Right from ancient period until now histories mark them as intelligent beings in courts and theatrical plays. Were they interpreted rightly or understood correctly? Becomes a question unanswered. Their presence in the courts was a boon for some kings keeping them sane at certain situations, relieving their stress. The exploration here is were they doing the same in these plays or much more. Are the fools or jokers seen in the plays necessary? , comic relief they provide is a must or can be ignored to save time are the explorations made in this paper. The talents they possessed is also scrutinized in the paper to show what made them special in plays and courts and how they lived through periods in the minds of people.

KEYWORDS: Jesters, Fools, Buffoon, Tricksters, clowns, International Nasreddin Year, Comic- relief, stupidus, Medieval Christmastide, The bauble, Fools hat

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the part played by jokers or fools in the plays. Their significance in the play is discussed with the trace of history and a need for a fool is portrayed extensively. Though it is believed that introducing a joker or a fool in a theatre or a play is to give a minor relaxation in the course of a performance, later oncoming periods proved their existence as inevitable. There is a famous saying about them, “Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit” by Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* which means they can crack jokes and sometimes give clever advices at times when needed. These fools made fun of things or people often which is either foolish or clever making the listeners think. If jokes were foolish, people laugh and forget but in case of clever jokes they tend to pose as mockery or criticisms. Historically speaking, clowns or court jesters emerged in the early 12th century and pharaohs of Egypt also had them around in their courts. This paper explores the work or need for jesters in courts and dramas.

II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Who were these people called “Jokers”?*:

The person who made others laugh in general were called by different names. These people crack a joke or show gestures that are funny when people watch. With regard to the names, they were addressed with, it differed from place to place that they originated from and also where they performed. They are called buffoons in circus, tricksters if they perform magic, jesters if they serve at court as entertainers, comedians in dramas and plays and jokers in some stage performances and so on. Their work or art form is unique wherever they perform. In some cases even their physical forms add to their success on stage. Early periods had jesters in courts who were clever and witty as well. It is believed that they served as pages and also as royal court men who enjoyed privileges like mocking the king at free will since they won the hearts of royalties. Next came these buffoons who performed buffoonery, the name is said to have originated from the word *buffoon* which had its origin from an Italian word meaning a puffed face clown. These clowns were dressed differently and usually they had coloured faces which were peculiar.

The jokers were sometimes differently abled or some physical deformities like a hunchback, dwarfism, etc. It was in a way an added advantage with regard to some kind of job to earn for their living. For example, a clown in a circus usually is a dwarf. It was quite challenging for them to accept the criticisms they face and need much confidence to do funny performances and magical tricks along with it. But all these clowns never spoke but made funny expressions for the kids in the performing

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place. They as mentioned earlier were mostly entertainers good at various things like juggling, storytelling, trickery, dancing, playing music, singing, etc.

B. Work of a fool or clown:

The fools or court jesters who were entertainers in court rooms enjoyed privileges and sometimes were appreciated for their valuable advices to kings. It is believed that these jesters served at ancient Egypt, China, Greece and Roman courts. Hence, their history dates back to 4th century and about 5000 years ago. The periods when written texts were not found had inscriptions and wall paintings depicting the clowns who served at the court which marks a special role they played at the court. The jesters had the freedom of speech and can speak of anything he feels which includes even mocking the rulers. This thing is significant because in the ancient days normal people were denied this, hence jesters were indeed special.

Beatrice K. Otto, in his book 'Fools are everywhere' states that, "Jesters could also give bad news to the King that no one else would dare deliver." This he records as "In 1340, when the French fleet was destroyed at the Battle of Sluys by the English, Phillippe VI's jester told him the English sailors 'don't even have the guts to jump into the water like our brave French'." In certain circumstances cultural anthropologists of the world say that sometimes people who had the urge to voice out for any political issues that was troubling the public called themselves tricksters to protect themselves because punishments were severe in those times. Townsen in his book on 'Jesters' addressed them as "daring political jesters". David Carlyon, in his article, 'The Trickster as Academic Comfort Food' has mentioned that a clown, Willaim F. Wallet, who was most accepted in royal groups in his 1870 autobiography stated that, "A mere fool differed from the jester- such as himself-which was an honourable position filled by an educated gentlemen with a license to speak." He even called himself 'Queen's Jester.'

C. Joker traditions and customs around the world:

Jokers, clowns or jesters prominently were found all around the world though not in these names. They had both similarities and differences despite cultural differences. Egyptian pharaohs were said to have had pygmies of Africa as court jesters as they were short. Ancient Roman clowns were called in variety of names according to their talents and trickeries. In fact a clown was called 'Stupidus', meaning 'mimic fool' in Latin. He was bald headed and wore a pointed hat and bright coloured clothes and mocked at the most serious character in the play that they acted in. The word *stupid* was believed to have originated from this word 'Stupidus', like morons from 'Moriones'. The jesters, clowns and people of the like were given more respect and sometimes considered as people bestowed with special power from the gods with good luck charms. In an article on 'Saturnalia' a pagan festival, it is said that a mock king mostly a lowly slave or fool was chosen who will rule over the people including the king for the whole festival duration. He was called 'lord of misrule' which was the origin of the 'Medieval Christmastide' tradition too. Jestere were considered as persons of great importance in courts. They were advisers to kings and persons who pacified the matters at court saving the laymen and king too during emotional turmoils. In "Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World" by Beatrice K. Otto, he quotes Quintilian, Roman rhetorician words:

"Now, though laughter may be regarded as a trivial matter, and an emotion frequently awakened by buffoons, actors or fools, it has a certain imperious force of its own which it is very hard to resist. . . . It frequently turns the scale in matters of great importance."

D. Jestere remembered now:

The jokers and clowns although seemed to have been around from 4th century, only in the 13th and 14th century were remembered with specific names. One among these was Nasred-in of Turkey of the 13th century who was also considered a hero for his wits and intelligence. He was celebrated for his wisdom and he opposed the Mongol invasion of his time. Though oldest of manuscripts date to 1571, his jokes are remembered that makes him famous and UNESCO declared 1996-1997 as 'International Nasreddin Year'. His jokes were always concluded with morals and in a book named 'A Turkish Jester', a translated work of George Borrow he applauds him by saying, "Some people say that, whilst uttering what seemed madness, he was, in reality, divinely inspired, and that it was not madness but wisdom that he uttered."

William Summers, a jester of King Henry VIII was universally adored and his picture is still hung in Hampton Court palace titled as "The poorman's friend", as he was kind-hearted. Rahere, a jester of Henry I, built a hospital which serves as teaching hospital as Bart's in honour of a saint named St Bartholomew who saved him from malaria. Likewise, many like Birbal from Akbar's court, Tenaliraman from Krishnadevaraya's court were among the nine gems. Though all these jestere made jokes and fooled around, the literary archaeologists say that they were not similar to the present-day clowns or fools. The clowns we see in plays and dramas actually had their origin from the circus clowns who were mostly dum-wits. They did acrobatics, juggling, magic and trickeries and also dressed similarly.

E. Costumes and masks:

The jestere or clowns of the ancient days did not have any specific type of dresses. They used bright and peculiar colours and the colour of their pants never matched each leg. They wore large masks as in the rituals or sometimes they painted their faces white. They wore a special type of hat in the medieval times which had three pointed portions and they carried bells on all, these

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were later called "fools hat" and later the ass's ears were included too. They also carried a special type of scepter along called 'the bauble'. The clowns who served at the king's court had to keep the king amused at court during meals and in celebrative occasions, hence from head to toe all things were modelled to bring amusement to the onlookers.

The masks were mostly used in ritualistic performances which were later replaced with white faces in the auguste clowns. Even to this day this white face painting is done and used in pantomimes and mime dramas where muted performances take place and expressions play a vital role. It was in the following periods it was accompanied with red balls in the nose, puffed faces, gloved hands, pointed shoes and more such things. They even sported shaven heads and wore colourful wigs too. These were in a way the modern day buffoon costumes.

F. Present day fools and jesters in theatres and plays:

There was always a necessity for amusement in entertaining platforms. This is where the term 'comic relief' came in to existence. Shakespeare's plays provided this as interludes and sometimes as special characters who appeared beside the serious characters like kings. They were categorized as natural and artificial accordingly. The natural fools were dwarfs and mentally deficient people and artificial fools were verbal intellectuals and had wisdom. Most of Shakespeare's fools were the second category fools like Hamlet's 'gravedigger' and the fool in King Lear. The former fools were the Clown type who made people laugh with comical doings and the latter made them think and sometimes even provided insights about the play. The artificial fools resembled the jesters of the medieval courts who mostly stayed as friends of the important characters in the play.

In ritualistic processions or acts, mostly the fools wore masks and were seen as people gifted by gods as discussed earlier. It was seen in the cultural festivities as in African Yoruba clans where they use a trickster's character who is dressed as a spider or hare. They weave stories or tell stories in a play or create chaos. In native American traditions, they also represent such characters who are like demigods. These tricksters are seen even in plays they write today which are similar to the serpent in Paradise lost by John Milton. In Indian theatres the Vidhushakas and Kattiyakarans were story tellers who appear along with the chief characters in all plays. They not only give comic relief as in Shakespeare's plays but also explain certain things happening in a play that the audience would likely not understand. They also serve as narrators in the theatre performances.

G. Coulrophobia and clowns:

Clowns of the modern world are feared at sometimes, and it is called coulrophobia. These clowns seem to take revenge for the way they were treated in the public or by the people. They who were being criticized openly to their face were suffering from depression. Sometimes they also show their way of protest against the social practices and the rich that treated the poor as unfit to live in this world. This is seen from Shakespeare's period where the fools showed sarcasm towards the decisions taken by the royals. One of the best example is 'John Falstaff' in Henry IV who provided his views openly but in a light manner. Whereas in the modern day they revealed their views not only sarcastically but threateningly. For this the best example is 'Joker' in Batman movie. He dislikes the rich and also money, in a way he portrays this when he burns the looted money in one of the scenes.

Costumes that were ridiculed or made fun of in the early periods became one that was feared as in the movie IT and Joker. In both these movies one could easily believe that a joker or fool can be villainous person as well. But when studied in depth both characters were facing problems in the society that they turned against it by committing murders. The sad thing is that their depression made them turn a blind eye towards logic and humanity. They killed innocent children. The fear in the eyes made them feel superior. Thus, this was later called as dark comedy. Dark comedy in the later days had become a new genre emerging successful beside the horror plays.

The jokers and fools in these works showed sarcasm and it resulted out of empathy. They were psychologically affected. Those jokers who accepted their deformities and mental instability before feared people but in these dark comedies they were feared. Nihilism is seen predominant in these dark comedies. It is a well known fact that jokers or fools in a play see or make people see a situation in a different perspective. In dark comedies the fool character not only has different perspective but somehow make people realise that morals and the concept of right and wrong were created to avoid chaos. As in joker movie the protagonist says, "They laugh at me because I am different, I laugh at them because they're all the same". But though they frighten they also make us realise that good and evil have a little difference because 'it is dropped at the first sign of trouble'. The quote from joker, "Give a man a mask, and he will become his true self" is true fact and also the sad reality is, "Some people want to see you fail. Disappoint them". All these simple dialogues from the dark comedies surely makes the people inspired and entertained making jokers and clowns lovable characters in whatever form they are portrayed.

H. Theatres that originated purely for amusement:

Jokers and people who were acting as fools in later periods excelled as individual stars later. Best examples are Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy. They made use of their comic body language to entertain people. They even tried to criticize the society and the politicians of their times. Best example would be the film, 'The Dictator,' where Charlie Chaplin played the lead role as 'Hitler'. These things in the later period helped in the introduction of Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of the Oppressed, Comedia dell'arte, Pantomime, etc., where sarcasm and comedy were combined and made people aware of social changes in a country through entertainment.

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In the Asian countries plays were also written solely for comedy like Noh Theatre, Kyogen Theatre, Opera theatre which were specifically designed for comedy and evoke pure amusement. These were mostly dance and musical theatres and were using comedy to reveal some specific things in between the plays or purely enjoyment to the onlookers throughout the performance.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the jokers or jesters were taken so lightly all through the eras, but their work has proved a necessary entity in theatre in the later periods. People who were entertainers had through their deeds lived in the hearts of the people and well-remembered. We cannot judge a book by its cover. "Well, God give them wisdom that have it; and those that are fools, let them use their talents" by William Shakespeare in "Twelfth Night" best distinguishes fools from wise men. Hence, people live long when they make others happy than war heroes. Some inimitable people live through ages and keep the hearts of people in merriment through ages to come.

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