The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (possibly written around 1386-1387) by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) exhibits with subtlety the author’s clear-eyed observation of life, his keen sense of human nature, and his encyclopaedic knowledge of the world around. Life in all its forms fascinated Chaucer; therefore Dryden eulogized him as “a perpetual fountain of good sense” (Sullivan, Critics on Chaucer 13). The Prologue is not an exception. But the quizzical problem that the readers have long been facing while reading The Prologue is the intricate and tricky twists in its narrative modes. They feel no hesitation in raising hands together against the indefinite mode of narration. In fact, the presence of multiple voices causes such indefiniteness in the readers’ minds. However, it is with the emergence of the Soviet philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) that these problems find a solution. The text having varied voices is now termed as “polyphonic” text. That The Prologue is a “dialogic” text is not merely because of its multiple narrators but also because of the presence of a wide variety of characters and Chaucer's usage of what S. H. Rigby calls “doubled-voiced” (Chaucer in Context 25) forms of speech, which allude to other forms of language. So, The Prologue is no longer a baffling subject for the late twentieth century and twenty-first century readers, who are already acquainted with Bakhtin and his philosophies. Chaucer puts different characters in a single place in a mood of festivity. The gathering of such multiple personalities, in a way, challenges the single, definite, or official “monologic” voice. Seen in the light of the “carnivalesque”, the variety of voices present in The Prologue continues to please us.

The convention of multiple-voicing and carnival world of life was common in the medieval works, particularly in Boccaccio’s Decameron and Rabelais’s works. Boccaccio, in his Prologue, employed the carnival world of buffoonery and grotesquity by presenting ten young ladies and gentlemen. And what we get is the image of popular medieval folk comedy. But, the images presented by Boccaccio differ from the images of Chaucer. Whereas Boccaccio’s images are associated only with folk comedies, Chaucer’s images are, in addition, linked to the pilgrims themselves, whose behaviour on the pilgrimage is itself carnivalesque. In fact, Boccaccio totally discarded the carnivalesque from the refined company of his prologue. Chaucer, on the contrary, does not impose any restriction.

Traditionally, the carnival was a Roman Catholic feast, extravagant in form, “before the Lenten fast began” (Cuddon 111). It comes from Latin carmen levare, meaning “to put away flesh” (111), and is generally associated with revelry and merrymaking. However, the term came to prominence after the publication of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World (1940). It refers not only to such festivities as Mardi Gras—celebrations marked by a licensed transgression of established social values—but also to “low” (Murfin 48) and popular forms of entertainment. Since the mass is primarily “concerned with the basic issues of survival” (48), Murfin adds, with sustaining and procreation of life, the carnivalesque language displays a similar
concern with bodily functions, such as “eating”, “sex” and “death” (48). Bakhtin could detect a shift from popular festive life to literary culture, arguing Rabelais’s grotesque representation of the human body, linguistic diversity, and taste for parody derived from the popular practices of carnival during the Renaissance. He believes that carnival is a utopian moment when dominant constraints and authorities are temporary overturned: authorial figures are parodied, routines are disrupted, and the body is commemorated. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais’s novels, with a focus upon the grotesque body, draws its subversive energy from carnival practices and, in a sense, the notion of the carnivalesque is drawn upon. Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnival are valuable because they offer a framework for assessing the influence of popular forms on literature.

In a carnival, various social and political strata mingle together in such a way that the existing authority and class distinction become either ineffective or unstable. Such juxtaposition of different voices welcomes polyphonic dialogue which highlights the subversion of authority:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of the time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It rejected all that was immortalized and completed . . . (Rabelais and His World 10).

One of the clearest instances of “carnivalistic juxtaposition” (Booker 35) happens in The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, where we find a gathering of a wide variety of pilgrims. The multiplicity of voices is contrary to the monologic one. The different utterances made by the pilgrims directly challenge the dominant authorial voice. Usually, whenever a monologic voice is created by the existing ideology, it tends to suppress the other prevailing voices. But Chaucer does not suppress any voice in favour of the other voices; he creates a free domain in his text and lets the voices interplay. Twenty nine pilgrims (excluding Chaucer who is a pilgrim himself) meet at the Tabard Inn on their way to Canterbury. They are going there for the blessings of the holy martyr Thomas a’ Becket who helped them when they were sick. Meanwhile, Harry Bailly, the host of the Inn, proposes a story-telling competition in order to make their tedious journey agreeable. In the tale-telling game, each of the pilgrims has to tell four stories—two on their way to Canterbury and two on their way back home. All the pilgrims give their consent. Putting such “heteroglossic gathering” (Booker 35) of figures under a same roof and distinguish them from each other is not an easy task.

Here we notice the pilgrims as representatives of diverse social categories, ranging from the Oxford clerk to the indecent miller, from lawyer to pardoner, from ecclesiastical to non-ecclesiastical.

Talking about the aspects of carnival, Bakhtin says:

They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapoliitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built . . . life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less . . . lived during a given time of the year. . . (Rabelais and His World 5-6).
In *The Prologue*, the carnival surpasses any single, disassociated individual. He brings a portion of cultural conversation—a gathering of multi-layered personalities, representative of varied cultures—where he engages his audience too. The carnival, writes Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929), “brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (123). With their coexistence, the opportunity of dialogism gets prominence. Chaucer’s egalitarian plan of allowing the pilgrims to tell their tales, of course in an implied and indirect manner, accentuates such interaction and varied discourses.

The very essence of the carnivalistic spirit is present from the introductory lines of *The Prologue*, through the renewal of nature. The festive season begins with the advent of the fresh showers:

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote  
> The droghte of March hath perced to the rote,  
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour. . . . (Raghunathan 1-4)

The sweet showers of April wipe out the dryness of March and set up the necessary natural cycle needed for procreation. It is now springtime, and nature is celebrating the advent of a new season, a new life. The old world is replaced by a new one. After the cold, lifeless winter, spring brings freshness, warmth, new life and joy. Talking about the “essence” of the carnival, Bakhtin writes:

> During carnival time life is subjects 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 . . . vividly felt by all its participants. . . (Rabelais and His World 7).

People under such environment is definitely enlivened and instigated to do something new and adventurous. So, it is the propitious time for pilgrims to set off their journey towards the pilgrimage. In such festive season, pilgrims from different parts of the world gather at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. They pass time after taking wine and the best quality of food from their host: “He served us with vitaille at the beste./ Strong was the wyn, and wel to drinke us leste” (Raghunathan 749-750). The image simply resembles a typical banquet scene of the medieval times.

In the next morning, all the pilgrims, guided by their Host, start moving towards their destination. From the festive banquet setting of the tavern they now proceed to Saint Thomas’ Watering, a place of execution. The immediate contrast is recognizable. By comparing it to any other feast, it makes us wonder whether the pilgrims met at Tabard simply for enjoyment or had they some holy purpose. We have to remember that in the world of the carnival spirit, the so-called noble, holy manner is overturned. This is because carnival indulges in festivity and promotes laughter: “Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages” (*Rabelais and His World* 8).
The celebration of physical life and body is present in abundance throughout The Prologue. Chaucer does not tend to miss a single detailing of physicality in the wide cross-section of representatives. He draws the face of the Priorress with delicacy. The Priorress displays her elegant nose, grey eyes, small mouth which is soft and red, and broad forehead. She is perfect in table manners. Not a single morsel of food can fall from her lips. She always keeps her lips clean: “Hir over-lippe wype d she so clene/ That in hir coppe ther was no farthing sene/ Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte” (133-135). The nose and the mouth were dominant medieval images of the carnival. Skin and facial hair were given emphasise during that time. In The Prologue, we are drawn close to such detailing as well.

The white skin of the Friar, the Merchant’s forked bread, the Franklin’s white beard and red complexion—everything is given stress in a jovial mood. We notice the Cook whose physical appearance is presented with a single grotesque detail, and open sore on his knee. The Monk’s head is bald; his forehead shines as if it has been anointed. When he rides, the jingle of his horse’s bridle can be head at a distance. The jingling of the bells of his horse is among the popular festive images. The Reeve, as portrayed by Chaucer, is a slender man with neatly shaven cheeks. The poet puts a close look in delineating his facial and hair:

His berd was shave as ny as ever he can;
His heer was by his eres ful round y-shorn;
His top was dokked lyk a preest biforn.
Ful longe were his legges, and ful len,  
Y-lyk a staf; ther was no calf y-sene. (588-592)

Chaucer’s Summoner is a man with narrow eyes, black and shabby brows, and thin beard. He displays a “fyr-reed cherubinnes face” (624). Now we come to The Pardoner, who has shining eyes like a hare’s. His hair is “as yelow as wex” (675); it hangs down thinly and lay overspread on his shoulders. Official culture was always connected to all that is spiritual and heavenly. Carnival, in sharp contrast, linked to the “grotesque realism in which the material bodily functions of sexuality, eating and ercretion bring down to earth all that aspir es to be spiritual and abstract” (Rigby 22).

As a portrait painter, Chaucer unveils his charismatic power of detailed observation. While delineating his characters, he never privileges any kind of snobbery or inclination. Not a single disparity is missed too. The Knight is presented as an ideal medieval knight, who loves chivalry, truth, honour, generosity, and courtesy. He is also a “verray, parfit gentil knight” (72):

Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,  
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,  
As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,  
And evere honoured for his worthinesse. (47-50)

His image resembles a typical Christian figure. He has already taken part in as much as fifteen battles and always come out victorious. The Knight is a replica of...
truthfulness and modesty. His attire is “bismotered” (76), as he has just returned from his service. The Knight’s stained attire is contrasted with the Squire’s “embrouded” (89), bright, and colourful dress. Furthermore, the Knight, who is a paragon of Christian chivalry, is representative of an estate ideal.

According to classical monologic writing, the knight is intended to restore order in place of evils and chaos and acts as the mouthpiece of the author. Whether Chaucer had planned something like that is subject of acute critical debate. But we must remember that, because of his close association with the royal court and royal business, he had to be diplomatic to some extent. We should further have in mind that he was much ahead of his time. However, against the ideal paradigm of the Knight, the young Squire is gaily presented. The Knight’s faded appearance is contrasted with his son’s gay extravagance. Whereas the father engrosses only in his idealistic and official duty, the squire is a lover who can compose and sing songs and even dance and write poetry. Thus, in the Squire, the subversion of the ideal Knight is truly seen.

The ideal portrait of chivalry in the Knight’s appearance, as depicted by Chaucer, is contrary to the carnival because chivalry is contrasted with the notion of the carnival. In chivalry, education, upbringing, etc., are given emphasis, and are affected by social standards. Here, one’s whole life is regulated by rules. Suffice to say, these chivalric rules or codes instigate the Knight to attend wars. Carnival does not bother about social position and chivalrousness, rather concentrates on equality. Naturally, the Squire, despite being the son of the “worthy” Knight, revels in worldly activities.

The Miller, who is introduced towards the end of The Prologue, is a generic image of the carnival man, with mighty mouth and prominent nose. His nostrils are black and wide. On the tip of his nose, he had “A werte, and theron stood a tuft of herys,/ Reed as the bristles of a sowes erys” (555-556). His wide spread mouth is like a furnace door—the conventional carnival image of the hell-mouth. He is a “stout carl” (545), a big and strong fellow with powerful muscles and large bones. His arms are thickly built. Chaucer puts a lot of emphasis on his physique. The Miller with a grotesque figure and comical face; with his indulgence in cracking indecent jokes and obscene stories, acquires a true carnival persona. With his talkativeness, boisterousness, colourful dress, and his taste in music, he stands as a sharp contrast to the noble, honest Knight. In fact, it is through the Miller’s “disposal” (Bisson 257) that Chaucer directly challenges the Knight’s worthiness in the world of epic and romance.

Another true festive and carnivalesque figure is the Wife of Bath. She is one of Chaucer’s most colourful characters. The Wife of Bath is a pretty woman, with her face red and bold. She is married since her youth, and had other lovers in her youth. Her gap-tooth indicates both her lustfulness and likelihood in travelling. As a cheerful woman by nature, she has already been in Jerusalem, Rome, Bologna, Galice and Cologne. She can easily get involved with the other pilgrims through laughter and jibes. The Wife of Bath’s constant disapproval of ecclesiastical laws, her disregard for prevailing Christian beliefs, her attitudes towards life and boldness in manners, her mastery over her husbands and lovers—all these accentuate the direct challenge against the social and patriarchal values, reflecting the carnival spirit. Such role-reversal is common to carnival:
We have seen that role reversals and overturns, specifically of the weak over the strong, were an important part of the festival atmosphere . . . women’s struggle to wrest control from men . . . was a significant feature of these reversals . . . (Bisson 255).

Women could be made instrumental for social criticism because they were excluded from political and religious authority. Ganim, in his Chaucerian Theatricality goes a step ahead and notes:

In her insistence on relativism of apparently official ideology . . . the Wife is . . . embodying the very mode of popular culture and of carnivalized literature: the privileging of the individual and the idiosyncratic over the officials the representation of authority as partial . . . the sense of fixed positions . . . (Ganim 54).

Chaucer, as already mentioned, had to be diplomatic in presenting anything which directly questions authority. He thus takes a new strategy and unfolds carnivalistic elements more through his frivolous characters like the Miller and the Wife of Bath, so that he may not be suspected. Chaucer does not merely treat The Prologue as a storehouse of incorporating various elements of the carnival world, but “makes the ‘carnivalesque’ the principle of the world he creates” (Bisson 258).

In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin examines that fourteenth century monologism was called into question by dialogism manifested in the form of carnival (5). He adds that folk culture was expressed through three distinctive forms and they found utterence in ritual spectacles, verbal competitions, and parodies such as curses and oaths (5). But these forms, however distinctive they had been, were closely associated with and interconnected in a number of ways. Such elements abound in The Prologue. The church and relics are parodied through the disputable religious activities and oaths by the ecclesiastical figures:

The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, . . . certain carnival forms parody the Church’s cult . . . (Rabelais and His World 7).

The Prioress is one such character. Her smile is “ful simple and coy” (119). Madame Eglantine is her name, a romantic one, which stands for a wild flower. Naturally, the Prioress having such wild and romantic association is a misfit in the claustrophobic environment of the church. She is not supposed to swear at all, yet she does so by St Eligius: “Hire gretteste ooth was by Seynte Loy” (120). She knows French according to the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe, because she did not know the French spoken in Paris. Now her real status of a nun is completely erased from our mind. We are left wondering if she should attend pilgrimage when nuns were forbidden to go by the fourteenth century bishops; or if she should not leave material pleasures for spiritual happiness. Further, nuns were forbidden to keep pets, yet Chaucer’s Prioress keeps small dogs and pampers them. Her love for gold and jewellery is highlighted as well:

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar/ A peire of bedes, the gauded al with grene,/ And theron heng a broche of gold ful shene” (158-160).

Whereas a monk generally lives in cloisters and strictly follows monastic rules, Chaucer’s Monk is a perversion of an ideal one. He rides horses and indulges in
forbidden hunting. Even, he does not mind to wear costly clothing made by the finest fur available in the country and love to keep a “love-knotte” (197). This brings to mind Bakhtin’s words: “certain carnival forms parody the church’s cult” (Rabelais and His World 7). In fact, The Monk does not care for strict disciplines established by St Benedict and St Maurus5. He makes fresh rules and lives life of his own. Chaucer’s humour is apt in this context: “And I seyde his opiioniun was good” (183).

In portraying the Friar, the gap between the ideal and the real is again narrowed. He is a “merye” and “solempne” (208, 209) fellow. Friars were considered to be holy during middle ages. He would spend a life of poverty and help others. What Chaucer shows is the perverted form of the idealised figure. The Friar of Chaucer does not like to lead a poor lifestyle; he takes as much money from sinners as he can. Not only his holiness and ecclesiastical values are satirised but also the role of the Friar in general is mocked. Similarly, The Summoner’s real work is to instruct guilty men not to be afraid, but in The Prologue, his appearance is so awful that children are afraid of him. He is not a cleric man in a direct sense but an outward official associated with the church. The Summoner is simply a debauched personality. The Pardoner, a friend of the Summoner, sells pardon. He loves to drink red and strong wine. He is basically a cheater, who sells false relics to poor people and makes money dishonestly.

The immoral activities made by these ecclesiastics or so-called religious characters push them into a non-ecclesiastical world. Therefore, the underlying distinction between the clerical and the secular world fuses, and reinforces the idea of carnival wherein boundaries are erased. Whether or not Chaucer sincerely intended to present these immoralities looming large in contemporary ecclesiastical hierarchy is not important in the carnival world, where clerical hypocrisies are parodied. It is the parody which, on the one hand, ridicules and mocks, on the other hand, pinpoints flaws to be mended. So, parody in carnival is not negative, rather optimistic. Bakhtin elaborates and gives reasons: “folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture . . .” (Rabelais and His World 11).

Being the Host of Tabard, Harry Bailly tries to render some fresh air among his guests by leading them to the story-telling game. As the environment at Tabard is joyous, Bailly’s proposal of the festive competition is instantly approved by all the Pilgrims. The winner of the tale-telling competition, as he says, will be felicitated by the rest:

And which of yow that bereth him best of alle,
That is to seyn, that telleth in this cas
Tales of best sentence and most solas,
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost . . . (796-799)

If anyone opposes his rules, Bailly adds, he must pay all the cost that will be spent on the way. His idea is simply brilliant for the tedious guests. Each of them delightedly agrees. What is interesting is that no single pilgrim, whether s/he belongs to any higher social rank, is given special advantage. Bakhtin’s notion of “all were considered equal during carnival” (Rabelais and His World 10) is smoothly pointed.
out. Since The Host becomes the master of the group, his position of a mere tavern keeper now shifts into a new zone. Soon, becoming the judge of the festive competition, Bailly enjoys his position as a temporary sovereign, who grants the privilege of “autocratic governance with an agreed-upon framework” (Bisson 253). However awkward Bailly looks to be, adds Bisson, they happily accept his rules and penalties of violation. That all the pilgrims agree to Bailly’s proposal indicates the reversal that they have now entered into a fresh, new world from the grasp of prevailing hierarchy; they do not at all mind whether this newly emerged world is governed by a mere tavern-keeper. From the Host’s stance, his constant endeavour to posit his authority and restore peace and order is indicative of his willingness “to enforce social distinctions and privileges, which carnival values suspend, if not erase” (Bisson 253).

For a great poet like Chaucer, it is justifiable to present a life-like mirror of contemporary life. He does so artistically. The medieval delight, humour, soothing satire, grotesque elements, and laughter among the folk culture, as finely depicted in Rabelais’s works, have also found sufficient scope in The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Like Bakhtin, Chaucer could possibly understand the importance of the carnivalesque elements: “They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Rabelais and His World 9). Chaucer’s generous heart offers an infinite space for the free play of such elements. And, therefore, the true greatness of the greatest resourceful poet of the fourteenth century lies in his art of rendering the carnivalesque aspects an enhanced form and reorienting “the fundamental medieval symbol of pilgrimage” (Bisson 261).

Notes
1. Canterbury is a holy place. There is a cathedral in Canterbury. For elaboration, see Raghunathan 50.
2. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was murdered in 1170, and canonized in 1173. For more information, see Raghunathan 50.
3. Such description is generally associated with heroines of romance. For a good discussion, see Raghunathan 58.
4. It was a dwelling of the English nuns, located at St Leonard’s at Bromley. For helpful information, see Raghunathan 58.
5. St Benedict was the founder of first monastery in 529 AD. St Maurus was his pupil. See Raghunathan 62.

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