



'WIT' AND 'HUMOUR' AS MODES OF EXPRESSION IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*

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ABSTRACT

'Humour' and 'wit' are the extremely challenging assignments Githa Hariharan chooses to take on dashing in her fiction in order to set her expression free of the monotonous strides and also to deride the social follies and unjust ideologies. In her fiction one would never fail to locate the themes as varied as that of corruption, nepotism, false pride, human arrogance, adultery and decline in moral values being ridiculed robustly and hammered upon through this extremely challenging approach. The present article seeks to critically examine as to how these devices ('wit' and 'humour') are emphatically employed by Githa Hariharan in her internationally acclaimed novel When Dreams Travel striving not only to explore the obscure terrains of human psyche but also to deride the self-centered human life that, in present day cosmopolitan society, stays eventually to be deprived of ethical values. An effort has been made to evaluate as to how, by means of these weapons, the author storms the human follies and the unjust ideologies, without, however, compromising with the due clinical efficiency.

Key Words: Epigrammatic, humour, wit, bondages, cosmopolitan, frivolities, shallowness,

INTRODUCTION

MH Abrahams in his world popular work *A Glossary of Literary Terms* explains very lucidly that "both 'humour' and 'wit' are the species of comic", and terms these elements as the



strong literary devices “designed to amuse or to excite mirth in the reader or audience” (Abrahams, 179). Humour, as a matter of fact, is derived from the theory of the “four humours”: blood, phlegm, cholera, and melancholy. The excess of any of these elements, as seen in the ‘Elizabethan Comedy of Humours’, determines a man’s nature that paves way to one of the comically eccentric characters. As we know by its first and foremost use, the term ‘comedy of humours’, was truly applied especially to the type of comic drama written by Ben Jonson. The term “humour” may be ascribed both to a comic speech and to a comic appearance or the mode of behaviour. ‘Wit’ though basically the mental faculty of intelligence is also, like ‘humour’, a species of comic effect. In a dramatic scene, however, the humorous speech does differ from a witty one; for the latter is often intended to be comic as against the earlier that may be a comic or serious one. In short, it may be safely said that a humorous saying does differ from witty one in its basic form; that is, it is not cast in the neat, epigrammatic form, an aspect that would surely be an inherent feature of a witty saying. Moreover ‘wit’ is always verbal while ‘humour’ cannot be restricted to its verbal use but has a much broader range of reference.

The terms ‘wit’ and ‘humour’ are complicatedly interlinked and thus needs differentiated fairly. As pointed out by MH Abrams ‘wit’ “denotes a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise”; and such a surprise is usually “the result of an unforeseen connection or distinction between words or concepts, which frustrates the listener’s expectation only to satisfy it in a different way” (179). The remark made by the American Comedian Abe Martin in this regard could thus be cited as a befitting example: “The only sure way to double your money is to put it in your hip pocket.”

“Humour” in its normal use, is said to represent what is purely comic – its form though need to be “harmless”; that is, laughter must be evoked without malice; and more so it ought to be sympathetic. “Tendency comedy” is, to say, a type of comic wherein “we are made to laugh at a person not merely because he is ridiculous, but because he is being ridiculed” and the laughter “is derisive, with some element of contempt or malice, and, therefore, serves as a weapon against its ridiculous subject” (181). Furthermore “harmless wit” and the “tendency wit” could be termed as two established sub-types of ‘wit’ based on the fact rather the laughter or smile is evoked with or without malice. The hard core fact what MH Abraham points out, “‘tendency comedy’ and ‘tendency wit’, but not humour, are among the major devices that a writer employs in satire, the literary art of derogating by deriding a subject” (ibid), thus maintains its sanctity beyond any doubt.

‘Humour’ and ‘wit’ are the two most significant tools Githa Hariharan takes on, not only as the sound modes of expression in her fiction but also as befitting weapons that enable her



carry on her business, and dwell into those hardcore terrains of human psyche that often remain aloof from the strides of many a good writers. She has often employed these devices not only to amuse the reader and make his perception free of the monotonous bondages but also to deride the prevailing social follies and the unjust ideologies. This is by the prudent and skillful use of these devices that she is capable of depicting her characters' psyche much more emphatically. The effect is so overwhelming that by application of these tools she robustly takes on and derides the themes as varied as that of corruption, nepotism and the progressive decline in contemporary moral values. While going through her fiction one would surely be subdued to the magic of her expression wherein by means of these devices the aspects as divergent as holistic healing, the polarization of the country, techniques of education, and deeply rooted social evils like 'superstition' are ridiculed in their fullest measure. She has ever since been keenly interested in experimenting with such devices, and working out their intricacies; thus arousing a curious sense of inquisitiveness in the mind of reader. "Humour is an extremely challenging approach to a writer", acknowledges an eloquent and astute Hariharan in an interview with Sumithra Thangavelu, and continues, "it is the kind of challenge I wanted to take on" (Indian Express, 6/5/2003). It is, however, important to note that while exercising these tools she does never compromises with the kind of restraint supposed to be exercised by a balanced and astute mind. The 'clinical efficiency' that ought to command the style of expression of a writer thus remains of paramount importance throughout her fiction. The apt and sophisticated use of these devices compels Veena Seshadri, the well known editor and writer, to remark: "her (Hariharan's) writing is not without the occasional gleam of humour". And "she can" continues the critic, "when she puts her mind to it, write with a rare sensitivity and restraint" (Seshadri 28). The humoristic elements in Hariharan's fiction are often found to be turning into ironic let-outs as the sheer deriding effects over the social follies and the vague human pride. The wordplay is very common as the author relies heavily over the use of those powerful units- 'the appropriate and befitting words'; and one would often notice these powerful units- 'the words' - turning into dark humour as acknowledged by the novelist herself in an interview by Preeti Verma Lal: "I think the humour in my work tends to irony, wordplay, dark humour for the most part." (Literate World, 21/03/03)"

It is through exercise of these powerful tools that help to seek a desired and sensitive backdrop in the very opening of her third novel: *When Dreams Travel*. As the story goes we learn that Shaharyar and Shahzaman, the two sultans in *When Dreams Travel*, having shattered by their wives' adultery, renounce their royal state and resolve to roam the world till they meet another king who has been equally dishonored. And when they really found one - the 'jinni' whose wife has been unfaithful to her master a hundred times, always in his presence and without ever being caught, we astonishingly come across a sort of soothing comfort that heals them and help recover magically: "What comfort" mocks the novelist



poignantly, “to discover a shame larger than one’s own!” (Hariharan, 15) In a ridiculous attempt Hariharan brings out the inefficiency and the sense of insecurity, sultan Shahzaman is overwhelmed with. What a pity! A powerful sultan (Shahzaman) who could rule and dispense justice the way he liked is indeed frightened of night, and so is worthily “best known for his campaign against night and its dark terrors ...” (43). As the story goes we learn that the nurse Sahiba, who is employed to cater the royal prince, “seemed to have been put on earth only to feed Umar (the prince), nourish him and protect him from the numerous evils”, the kind of what the author suggests, “the royals are vulnerable to.” (215)

The way Shahryar’s adviser, the author of the edifying treatise, ‘A Guide to Slave-Buying’, accords his approval or disapproval for acquiring Hindu slave women, does not only reflect an astute humorous touch but also brings out Hariharan’s deriding impact on unreasonable and unjust way the chauvinistic sultan exploits the women: “The Hindu Jawari are faithful and tender, but unfortunately they tend to die young.” His chauvinistic whims are thoroughly exposed and robustly hammered upon by the novelist; and the whimsical parameters to select or reject a woman that is too for slaving deserves due attention:

“Now this one - her eyes are not deep-set, so she can’t be an envious sort. She doesn’t blink too often either, so that is malice taken care of. Her hair is thick and wiry; obviously has courage. And though she sounds mad, I think I can clear that doubt – the black part in her eyes is not larger than the white, so there is nothing to worry about.” (92)

Making a prudent use of ‘wit’ and ‘personification’, the novelist’s pen glides through smoothly and explores the world of non living objects wherein the sky is found to be “sheltering the palace roof”, and the “stars winking roguishly” as if “they have no clue about the whereabouts of their rivals, the clouds.” (238)

Later as the story goes, we find that when the Eternals (inhabitants of one part of the city), proving to be “simple idiots who could be satisfied with just poking and prodding”, turned to mock the moaning lizard. And see the novelist’s description of one of them who threw away his stick and turned to the others: “He had a bushy grey beard and a nose like hungry vulture’s beak.” (135) We also find one of the Eternals who came to see and mock the moaning half woman in Eternal jungle booming in a firm voice. The witty comment of novelist is again noteworthy: “This one had thin lips and a belly so swollen you’d think he had swallowed half the city in a gulp.” (135-36) As we move along we find befitting description of the room Satyasama had rented in the traveller’s lodge as the one that is “small, airless and hospitable to mosquitoes.” (201)



CONCLUSION

While turning the pages of Hariharan's fiction one is bound to receive a magical effect through little powerful deft strokes of her pen that very conveniently glides through paving way to pretty little sentences wrapped into witty and humorous wardrobe in order to deride the targeted social follies; her third novel *When Dreams Travel* is, of course, not an exception to it. It thus goes without saying that humour is her foray in the fictional world that vigorously wraps the social follies, the unjust ideologies and the vague human pride. More importantly the clinical efficiency with which the author hails through makes her a wizard at handling these tools. Needless to say that while dwelling through her fictional arena one would never fail to observe that how deftly the dark and latent recesses of human psyche are examined and explored by an astute Hariharan through those dexterous exercises: the little powerful and deft strokes of 'humour' and 'wit'.

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