

UNIQUE FEATURES OF BLACK HUMOR IN SATISH ALEKAR'S PLAYS: A CRITICAL REVIEW

-Prof. Vikas Meshram
Assistant Professor,
SGB Mahila Mahavidyalaya,
Tumsar.

“They say theatre is reflection of life but at times it works as a therapy too!”

-Satish Alekar

The introduction of the Western culture in the East has acquainted the Avant-garde trends of Western literature in India, as a result of which the Indian writers began to imitate their styles and fashions. The influence of Western culture and literature that we notice today in India is caused by this accident of multiculturalism and it has given impetus to many generations of writers to pen down their expressions in hitherto unknown techniques and manners like, Absurd drama, Black Humor, Epic Theatre, etc. Satish Alekar is one amongst those modern Indian writers who exhibited this foreign influence more than others in the literary history of India. Satish Alekar, an eminent playwright and director, is credited with moulding a new paradigm in Indian theatre. His most notable plays that have been translated in English are- “Micky and Memsahib”, “Terrorist”, “Dynasts”, “The Dread Departure”, and “Deluge”. His expression, humor and experimentation on stage have been widely appreciated. His plays move round fantasies with a hue of Black Humor.

The present paper is aimed at reviewing and analyzing the unique and distinguishing features of the black comedy or dark humor that the modern Marathi playwright, Satish Alekar has exploited with the best of the results in his plays. It will be an attempt here to critically evaluate the traits of black humor and the elements of absurdity in Alekar's plays, and also to establish him as one of the most experimental and innovative playwright of the modern times in India.

Comedy has been a favorite genre with the writers since the times of Shakespeare and even long back of his age. It is an inseparable part of life as well. Human laughter arises from

many a factors of life; it is generated not only from the funny activities, oddities, shortcomings and behavioral dysfunctions of the people but also frequently from desperation, violence and suffering. No one's life lacks any of these features. Writers have been exploiting such incidents and events that create humor in their works to generate comedy since times immemorial. The story writers, novelists and dramatists employ these elements of comedy as an attack on the shortfalls of the people, society and human errors. This is a common form of comedy of which the people have been habituated. However, there is another kind of comedy that generate humor not from the funny things and oddities of life, but from some of the gravest issues and taboos from which people generally keep away to talk about. This other kind of comedy that sometimes looks bizarre, freakish and shocking is called 'Black humour' or 'Black comedy'.

It was Andre Breton, a surrealist theoretician, who coined the term Black Humor to designate a sub-genre of comedy and satire. It regards human suffering as absurd rather than pitiable or that considers human existence as ironic and pointless but somehow comic. According to The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 'It(Black humour) is a literary form that combines the morbid and grotesque with humour and farce to give a disturbing effect and convey the absurdity and cruelty of life'. Black humour often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character'(Raju,1). The characteristics and distinguishing features of Black humor become clear from the definition of the term in The Columbia Encyclopedia,

Black humor, in literature, drama, and film, grotesque or morbid humor used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of the modern world. Ordinary characters or situations are usually exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony. Black humor uses devices often associated with tragedy and is sometimes equated with tragic farce.

The above definitions of the black humor describe some essential and common characteristics of the term. Firstly, in black comedy, the taboo issues are dealt with in an amusing manner, though their seriousness is retained. The blacker side of life or the dark issues like death and sex, suicide or violence are laughed at and satirically ridiculed with an intention of bringing out some larger truth to the fore. Secondly, there is absurdity in the treatment of the theme as the insensitivity and paradoxes are used to show the meaninglessness of life. Thirdly, everything is

shown in an exaggerated manner far beyond the limits of satire and irony. This exaggeration creates comedy, but the audience finds it difficult to laugh at it. These are some common features of black humor kind of drama that we find in Satish Alekar's plays also.

Black Humor

The plays of Satish Alekar present the minute discussion of the issues like death, sex, corruption, terrorism and so on, which are considered taboos in Indian society. In his plays, Alekar created humor not on supposedly comic themes, but on some of the gravest issues, such as death in 'The Dread Departure', terrorism in 'Terorrist', sexual degradation in 'Dynasts'. When such serious issues are mocked and laughed at, the kind of humor generated is called black humor in which the reader or the audience experience a situation of an uncomfortable laughter. As Alpna Saini in her paper puts it, "Alekar believes that theatre is not realistic and false where everything has to be made up. Therefore, he has chosen a form which is full of fantastical situations and dream sequences"(265), the form of Black Comedy was natural form for Alekar that suited his mind and learning. A scholar says in this regard that, "With his plays like Mahanirvan (1974) and Begum Barve (1979) he created new idiom in Marathi theatre by his unique use of black humor, language and absurdity to convey the oblique sense of reality"(The Playwright).

Alekar's first play *The Dread Departure*, as Bandopadhyay remarks in his Introduction to the Collected Plays, "the dramatic strategy [of Black Humor] is fully fleshed out in *The Dread Departure*"(4), which ridicules and exposes absurdity, superstitiousness and the adherence to the trivial rituals and beliefs behind the Hindu death ritual. The whole presentation and the treatment of the theme of death has been dealt with in such a humorous and grotesque manner that the audience experiences laughter and discomfort both simultaneously. In this play, Bhaurao is the father of Nana and husband of Rama, who is dead and now wants his son Nana to take him to the crematorium and burn him there in all due ritual manner. But, the twist in the story is that, the old crematorium has been closed by the corporation and a new Electric crematorium has been provided in which Bhaurao does not want to be cremated. So Nana has to keep the dead-alive, walking and talking, body of his dead father at his home hidden from everyone including his mother. Meanwhile, they come to know that a new person of "suit and shades" has charmed

Rama, Nana's mother, and thus both of them play a 'play within a play' like Hamlet in order to know who that 'suit and shades' person is. Then at the closing of the play, nothing happens and Nana has to take Bhaurao to the old crematorium again to burn him as is his wish and give bribe to the gateman to cremate him there.

The grotesque and satirical presentation of death generates humor in the minds of the audience, but at the same time, it also compels them to think about their triviality and senselessness attached to the ritual of burning the dead. Alekar has satirized and ridiculed not only the death taboo in this play, but also the rituals, faiths and superstitions that follow a person's death. An example can be given how Alekar ridicules the rituals of the Hindus. As Nana set out to go to the new crematorium and exits, the two men wearing RSS uniform and bald headed, same as Brahmin, enter squabbling with each other on who will give the rice balls to crow first. They are first shown calling each other with obscene names and then quarreling like ignorant children. Here, the absurdness of the custom has been stated through the mouth of the Man2. He says, "I am waiting for the crow, my father's soul. If he is not hungry and does not peck at my balls, I will have to make one out of straw and my father's soul wont like that, I'm sure." (Alekar, 51). Incredibly, the father becomes a crow after death that comes to peck at the rice balls according to the Hindu custom, and hence he calls his dead father a crow. And if no such crow appears on the scene, he will have to make a straw-crow and peck at the balls himself; otherwise the soul of his father would not get peace. How ridiculous and absurd this custom is which reduces men to crows.

The second play of Satish Alekar that uses Black humor and fantasy in a surrealistic way is *The Terrorist*. Here again he shows things in a new light and defends and advocates Terrorism as a good and reputable field of occupation in order to ridicule the Islamic fanaticism and their resort to terror. This is again done in sarcastic manner to expose the bizarre mentality of the people who suppose that being a terrorist or advocating violence in any form is a reputable and dignifying thing for them. Here, a family has been shown who tries to find access for their son in one of the most forbidden field of Terrorism to seek power and authority. Bapurao, the father of the son Baburao, reads once in the newspaper about the terrorist's attack and wants his son to be one like them. To fulfill his wish, he takes his son Baburao with him at the north (across the border) where he recruits him in the job of terrorism. When he returns back to his home again after his training, everyone wants to have his Darshan as if he is a knight who has returned back

from a noble war and have now attained the stature of the great ones. He is given reputation and honour and the other family wants to marry with him their daughter. At the end, he has to go on his confidential job for which he takes leave and disappears. This play also is, as Bandopadhyay remarks,

set once again in a petite bourgeois neighbourhood, the play conjures up a community pinning its hopes on finding access to a faceless centre of power and authority, no longer associated with either State and its legal instrumentality or the underworld as such, defined as a secret army with its own training system, penetration into the order of normal social life, and reign of terror sanctified by religion and perpetrated by a pack of morons (10).

Thus in this play, Alekar has displayed his technique of mock-heroic in giving the sacred treatment to the profane and raising the mundane to the sublime, as is evident in Bapu's induction into the secret organization treated as a pilgrimage to the north. However, the comic and humorous part is weak in this play, though the issue of terrorism has been dealt with in a grotesque manner. It is because Alekar has retained the seriousness of the topic while dealing with it.

Exaggeration

One of the handiest devices for black humor is exaggeration. The author of the black humor has to deal with the intensely grave issue in a comic way and showing such grave things in an exaggerated manner contributed is a good way of ridiculing them. Apart from generating laughter, the intention sometimes can also be to satirize the individual and social vices by showing them in exaggerated stature. This makes the tragic and serious issue in a black humor drama grotesque and farcical. There are several events and situations in his plays where he shows things and characters in an exaggerated form. For instance, in *The Dread Departure*, Alekar shows the dead body of Bhaurao walking and talking, even going to the crematorium on foot along with his son Nana. Then there is an exaggerated manner of waiting for Nana who has gone out to play sport, and also of the preparation of the funeral procession by the singing and dancing neighbors. There is exaggeration in the Gateman's description of the new crematorium provided

by the corporation that “the municipal corporation will also provide citizens with a café in this beautiful and modern crematorium”(44), as if it is not a place for burning the dead people, but a place of recreation and people would go there daily to enjoy their best time. Then in *Terrorist* also, an exaggerated proportion has been given to the newspaper and the journey to the north India where Bapurao takes his son, Baburao to recruit him in the terrorists camp. Their journey towards the north and the reception of Bapurao is also in an exaggerated proportion. Baburao’s Boss has nothing to do in his office and so, brings Tiffin-box for the newly made terrorist Babu, who chastises him for being late.

Thus the use of exaggeration serves best the purposes of the black humor kind of play, in that, it intends to ridicule and satirize the follies and oddities of the people. Exaggeration shows things in a comic color which changes our outlook of seeing at those things.

Brechtian Distancing

The concept of Distancing, as also christened as Alienation or Detachment, have been made popular in literature by Bertold Brecht, the German poet and playwright, was the greatest theatrical reformer. His epic theatre departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion. Dr. N. Velmani describes this device of epic theatre as,

The alienation – effect is a social device, the purpose of the effect is to enable the spectator to exercise fruitful criticism from a social point of view. The estrangement from illusion of reality is achieved by meta-theatrical elements such as stage devices like induction, the play-within-the play, direct speech and aside addressed to the audience...Brecht employed “literarization” of the theatre with the help of subtitles and projection to achieve the documentary effect.(22)

Alekar uses this distancing effect in his plays as a new instrument in his hand to depart from the traditional dramatic art. This effect also serves the purpose of creating humor by reminding the audience during a scene that it is not a reality and they view it from a critical detachment. It adds a different flavor to the play. There are such incidents in Alekar’s plays where he has used this distancing effect like, when the neighbors move around Rama in a singing

manner asking her to go and “just sit in a dark”, Bhaurao directly addresses the audience to tell them what he is thinking about his death and his son Nana who has gone to play Prisoner’s Base. Bhaurao goes on to tell about the childhood qualities of Nana .This is in the Brechtian fashion where he has used a technique to make the audience aware of the reality that they are watching a play. Another incidents in *The Dread Departure* are when, at the end of the Act I, Nana asks somebody to drop the curtain, “Burn! Burn! Someone burn this heavy load of my dead father off me. Let his skull crack in the fire like a rifle shot. Retrieve me. Release me. Help me, someone! At least, drop the curtain!”(46).

Then in Act II, there is the use of direct speech of Nana who tries to shut his mother up, “It’s the good fifteen minutes since the curtain has gone up and here I am lisping soliloquies”(48). There is exploitation of another device of alienation, that is, the play-within-the-play when Nana presents Bhaurao as the man in ‘suit and shades’ before Rama. In this way, the dramatist recurses to these devices of alienation or distancing to make his readers aware that they are only watching a play and thus to bring them out of the illusion of reality.

Satire and Irony

Satire, which is the mocking or ridiculing the target of satire to rectify it, and Irony, which is to present things in a contrasting manner to mean something else from the apparent meaning, both are two great associates of the comedy. They also play an intrinsic and vital part in a black humor kind of play where the grave issues and topics are ridiculed for generating humor. In *The Dread Departure*, we find the preparation of the funeral procession of Bhaurao has been shown in a satiric color. The neighbors who gather at the house of Bhau first sing songs in waiting for Nana. They play ‘Last word starts the rhyme’ for whiling away the time in the absence of Nana. Then after his arrival, they start singing again and make the preparations of the bier and other essential things of the procession in a singing manner. Alekar has presented the procession in a satiric manner here in order to show how people overreact and do many foolish things at such a situation. Then in *The Terrorist*, the festival of Ganesh idols have been ridiculed which are worshipped every year by the Hindu people.

Babu: Where is the big Ganesh idol kept during the rest of the year?

Vastu: We keep it wrapped in a plastic sheet because of the rains....

Babu: Get a few iron cages made. Place them at all crossroads and keep the Ganesh idols in them. Guard them throughout the year. Open the cages on every Chaturthi, so that people can pay homage.(Alekar,214)

Here, Alekar has tried to satirize the every-year-celebrated festival of Ganesh Chaturthi where people worship the Ganesh idol by establishing it in their houses for ten days, and then drown it in the river or sea on eleventh day, as if they can't tolerate it any more. The author suggests in satiric manner that instead of keeping the idols of Ganesh in plastic sheets, they should build iron cages for the idols and guard them throughout the year. Thus they won't have to buy new idols every year.

Alekar also shows good skills in throwing ironic comments at the follies and oddities through the mouth of his characters. His play, *The Terrorist*, is replete with ironic dialogues and comments, because the very theme and title of the play is ironic. There is ironic glorification of the terrorism in Act II when the Young Man meets Babu and tells him,

.....after my graduation, I was without job. Then our Corporator showed me the way. He told me you were. He told me you were coming back with revolutionary ideas [of terrorism]. There was some money left over from Ganesh festival. With that money, he opened a blood bank in front of my house. It is open twenty four hours a day. Work on the night-shift. When I get bored, I beat-out a tune on the bottles of blood with my pencil.
(215)

Here, Alekar presents two things in ironic manner. Firstly, the money that is collected in Ganesh festivals from the people are misused by the organizers of the Ganesh Pandals. And secondly, the terrorism will shed blood and as a result, there will be blood shortage. So the young man sets up bloodbank in front of Babu who has become a terrorist now.

Absurdity

Black humor is one of the ingredients of the Theatre of the Absurd. It may be because both of these dramatic techniques present grave issues in a grotesque manner. In *The Dread Departure*, the theme regarding the death of a person has been ridiculed and everything has been presented in an absurd fashion. We find the nonsense blabbering in the play (take for example the

dialogues of the neighbors), purposeless striving for doing things, but reaching nowhere (as Bhau and Nana try to burn the dead body in the crematorium but fail), the fascination of death and suicide, etc. All these are features of the theatre of the Absurd also. This absurdity plays a big role in black humor, as it adds a special flavor in the drama and makes the humor even blacker.

Fantasy

All the plays of Satish Alekar move round fantasies, but in the plays where he has used black humor like *The Dread departure* and *The Terrorist*, the whole stories have been laid down in fantastic situations. The rising of the dead Bhaurao, talking and walking to his own crematorium, rotting and stinking, but having no feelings except the feeling of being betrayed by his wife in *The Dread departure*, all these have fantastic apparel. This use of fantasy was necessary to suit the purpose of black humor. As Alpna Saini in her paper puts it, "Alekar believes that theatre is not realistic and false where everything has to be made up. Therefore, he has chosen a form which is full of fantastical situations and dream sequences"(276).

Thus, the plays of Satish Alekar are revolutionary in the history of Indian drama for many reasons, but mainly for the setting and the paradigm which the playwright chose for his dramas. The fact that no earlier writer had used black humor in the manner in which Satish Alekar has used it, makes the later writer unique and visionary. It set his place permanent in the history of Indian drama.

Works Cited

- 1) Alekar, Satish, Collected Plays: Oxford University Press. 2009.
- 2) Bloom, Harold, Dark Humor: On dark humor in literature.2010.
- 3) Breton, Andre, Anthology of Black Humor: City Lights Publi.,2001.
- 4) Friedman, Bruce J. "Foreword, *Black Humor*." *Black Humor: Critical Essays*. Ed. Alan R. Pr
New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993. 19-24.Print.
- 5) Gehring, Wes, American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire;1996.Web.
- 6) Matrondola & O'Neale, Black Comedy, Genre Report: UCLA,2002.Web.
- 7) Pratt, Alan, Black Humor: Critical Essays: New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.
- 8) Saini, Alpna. *The Comic and the Surreal*:Indian Drama in English. Ed. by Kaushik, Abha Shukla. Atlantic Publi.2013.
- 9) Leclair, Thomas, Death and Black Humor, in Critique, Vol. 17.:1975.
- 10) Merhi, Venessa M., Distortion as Identity from the Grotesque to the l'humour noir.2006.

- 11) Nicholas, Lezard, From the Sublime to the surreal; The Guardian (London),2009.
- 12) O'Neill, Patrick. "The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humor." *Dark Humor*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010: 79-104. Print.
- 13) Pasewark, Kyle A. "The Troubles with Harry: Freedom, America, and God in John Updike's Rabbit Novels." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. 6.1 (1996): 1-33. Print.
- 14) Raju, M. David. "Black Humour and Ennui in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, ED. by Bite, Vishwanath and Bite Madhuri.DEC. 2013, Vol. 4, Issue VI. Web.
- 15) Schulz, Max, Black Humor in Encyclopedia of World Literature in Twentieth century. Ed. By Fredrick Ungar and Lina Maineiro; 4 Bals New York: Ungar.1981.
- 16) Schulz, Max F.. "Toward a Definition of Black Humor." *Black Humor: Critical Essays*. Ed. Alan R. Pratt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993. 155-174. Print.
- 17) Schulz, Max. "Pop, Op, and Black Humor: The Aesthetics of Anxiety." *National Council of Teachers of English*. 30.3 (1968): 230-241. Print.
- 18) Seed, David. "Black Humor Fiction." *A companion to Twentieth Century United States Fiction*. Ed. David Seed. West Sussex: Blackwell, 1988: 159-70. Print.
- 19) [www. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology_of_Black_Humor](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology_of_Black_Humor).