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Black Humour in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Weight Loss*

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Abstract

Upamanyu Chatterjee is a well-known Indian writer whose works mostly dealt with black humour or dark comedy. This article contains the outline of the story *Weight Loss* and major characters' sufferings which are black humour and minor characters' sufferings which also are considered as black humour. The main character of this story is Bhola, whose sufferings and love for the Physical Education teacher and his sexual feelings are portrayed as black humour by Upamanyu Chatterjee. This is one of the good examples for his mastery of dark comedy.

Keywords

Black Humour; Dark Comedy; Upamanyu Chatterjee; *Weight Loss*.

Indian writing in English has two prominent and prolific phases through which we can understand and analyse the origin of English writings in India, development of English writings in India and the expansion of English writings by Indian writers. The first phase of Indian Writing in English is poems. This is conceived and contributed by Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo through their poems *Gitanjali* and *Savitri*. The second phase is prose and fiction. This phase is very important and gets modernistic aspects through Jawaharlal's *Discovery of India* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.

“The sense of fragmentation developed into a sense of absurdity, of existential futility, which echoes and goes beyond the kind of futility expressed in the works of authors (Carter 412)”. Dark comedy is a comic work or comic incident which shows the sufferings of the major or minor characters in the novels. The comic incident might be sorrow or worry or sad feelings of the characters which gives amusement or ridiculous situations. The comedy has existence in the dark part of life. Only because of this, it is called dark comedy or black humour.

Black humour was coined by surrealist theoretician Andre Breton in *Anthology of Black Humour*, 1955. According to M.H. Abrams, Black humour means baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish and its events often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd (2). Chris Baldick stated,

A kind of drama (or, by extension, a non-dramatic work) in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to offend and shock. It is prominent in the theatre of the absurd. (Baldick 36)

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959 in a Bengal family in the autochthonous of Patna, Bihar. He joined the Administrative Service in 1983 and later he published several works which includes short stories like *The*

Assassination of Indira Gandhi, *Watching Them* and novels like *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988), *The Last Burden* (1993), *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000), sequel to the debut novel, *English, August*, *Weight Loss* (2006), *Way to Go* (2011), which was short listed for the Hindu Best Fiction Award and as a sequel to *The Last Burden*, and his latest fictional work *Fairy Tales at Fifty* (2014). He is married and has two daughters.

The magnum opus of Upamanyu Chatterjee, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, has won the Sahitya Akademi Award for writing in English in 2004. In 2008, he received the accolades of order of officer des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government for his contribution to literature. The milieu of Chatterjee's works mainly deals with black humour.

In this novel, *Weight Loss* (2006), Bhola goes through life falling for all the wrong people. At school, he lusts indiscriminately after his teachers, both male and female, and is equally attracted to eunuchs. While in college, he has vaguely demeaning affairs with his landlady, and a vegetable vendor-cum-nurse and her husband. Later, he marries (a woman with a voice like liquid gold), fathers a daughter and suspects he is close to balance and beauty. Then his past catches up with him. Upamanyu Chatterjee, especially in this novel, vividly demonstrated the physical sufferings of Bhola by his fat body in a comic manner (Dark Comedy) and his eagerness in the sexual matters with whoever he has to see in his surroundings.

The first chapter of this novel is "Womanish". The term 'Womanish' contains two meanings. First, it means one person who is having the qualities of women and second, it means one person who is having feelings towards women. In this novel, Chatterjee begins Bhola's character in the light of the former definition of womanish and in the middle of the novel, he portrays Bhola in the light of the latter definition of womanish. Anthony is a Physical Education teacher, who calls Bhola as womanish. In this scene, Bhola was embarrassed and felt worried for being called as "womanish" because his

classmates especially girls are present there. Chatterjee in the very first chapter of this novel particularly by the usage of the single word “womanish” evokes black humour.

Chatterjee starts to decorate the novel with black comedy at the beginning level, with the main character of the novel having fat body or physique. His classmates are making fun of Bhola’s physique. Bhola’s physique affects Bhola’s psychic. In the double sports period, from 12.25 p.m. to 1.35 p.m., the physical education teacher Anthony asked the students to swim in the swimming pool. Now Bhola hates to display his body in front of all students. Chatterjee explains Bhola’s sufferings through black humor.

He hated swimming and displaying his body before others. It was hot and his scalp burned. He was scared and ashamed of himself for not being aroused by women. With his friends, he snickered and joked about breasts and cunt but he—they all—had the vaguest notions about the second; about the naked female form divine he was curious without feeling for it any desire. He had noted, for instance, that his stepmother’s breasts were large but nothing within him had stirred at visualizing them. (Chatterjee 9)

The interaction between fat boy Bhola and the physical education teacher, the reaction of Dosto and also the perception, feelings, love, lust, affection on physical education teacher by Bhola are well schematized scenes. These scenes are portrayed as dark comedies in a good manner. Here one of the major incidences is well portrayed by Chatterjee:

How old are you—twelve, thirteen?

Eleven, sir.

Eleven! You look at least twenty-five’. Dosto snorted, short and sharp like a fart. Anthony glared briefly and murderously all around. ‘You look older than me, fat boy. How old do you think I am? He looked thirty and was actually forty-one.

Fifty-three, sir'. (Chatterjee 6)

Dosto is the only friend of Bhola. He always gives some murmuring sounds, gestures for the comments whenever there is an interaction between the physical education teacher Anthony and the fat boy Bhola. Here Anthony tells Bhola, that he is looking like twenty five years old man. At the very next second of this comment told by Anthony, Dosto could not control his laughing. Here Chatterjee gives the simile about Dosto's laugh as a fart sound (sharp and short). In the next sequence Anthony asked Bhola about his own age with a snicker, Bhola replied as fifty three but his actual age is forty one.

Bhola has stolen money from Anthony, the physical teacher to whom he wrote three love letters. Here Chatterjee once again starts to open a new account of Black humour, the love or lust on the physique of physical education teacher Anthony.

1. I am a boy and you are my god. I saw you once and can't get you out of my mind or body. I want to worship your strong manliness and feel your great hard buM forever over my face. Please my god meet me on the 13th at 7pm at the North Gate of the Centenary Stadium. I want to be your woman. From your slave. (buM particularly refers to irksome to compose. Nowhere amongst the headlines had he found bumpy, bumper, bumpion, bumpkin or bumblebee.)
2. You did not come, you sexy ditcher (from 'last ditch effort' and 'cropper', both from the same headline over a report on the failure of some NATO legerdemain). You will torture me by not meeting me. I love it but I love your body even more. Please please meet me on the 20th.
3. IT'S ME. IF YOU LOVE ME, WEAR YOUR BROWN PANTS TOMORROW SO THAT I MAY KNOW. (Chatterjee 10,11)

Moti and Titli are husband and wife and they are low class labours. Bhola has sexual relationship with both husband and wife. It is another dark humor which vividly described by Upamanyu Chatterjee. Here Chatterjee explains minor characters' sufferings. Moti is the husband of Titli and Titli and Moti have no time for sex. So Bhola used them for his lust. When Moti knows the sexual relationship between Bhola and Titli, he could not control his anger and so he scolds Bhola. "First my wife, then me, sometimes on the same day with the same lips (277)".

Through the above line Chatterjee expresses the black humour of minor characters. Moti works hard and has no time to have sex with his wife. Moreover, there are also several dark humours delineated by Chatterjee. Especially Bhola's death and sufferings have been well described as black humour. Thus Chatterjee adds the scenes from first chapter, Womanish, swimming pool incidents, the conversation with Anthony and Bhola's sexual relationships with Moti and Titli continues to work as dark comedy. By these descriptions Chatterjee explains black humour and has given the situations which are easily shown as dark comedy or black humour and he proves that this work is completely concentrated with dark comedy or black humour.

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