

## 23. Unique Features of Black Humor in Satish Alekar's Plays

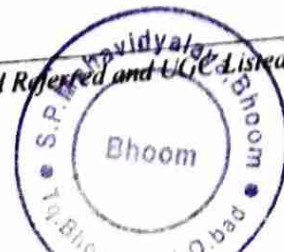
Prof. Surwase Gokul Hanumantrao

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shankarrao Patil Mahavidyalaya, Bhoom District  
Osmanabad (MS)

"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 mounding 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, short comings 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 humor) 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'. 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 is 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 'Terrorist', sexual degradation in 'Dynasts'.



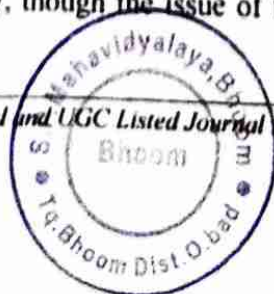


When such serious issues are mocked and laughed at, the kind of humor generated is called black humor in which the reader or the audience experience a situation of an uncomfortable laughter. As Alpna Saini in her paper puts it, "Alekar believes that theatre is not realistic and false where everything has to be made up. Therefore, he has chosen a form which is full of fantastical situations and dream sequences", 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 Play Wright). 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", 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 have 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 Man. 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 won't 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 repute 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 neighborhood, the play conjures up a community pinning its hopes on finding access to a faceless centre of power and authority, no longer eras societies 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.

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



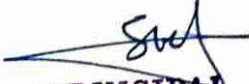


protesque manner. It is because Alekar has retained the seriousness of the topic while dealing with it.

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