

Homour and Wit as the Modes of Expression: a Study of Githa Hariharan’s The Ghosts of Vasumaster

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ABSTRACT

‘Humour’ and ‘wit’ are the extremely challenging assignments Githa Hariharan chooses to take on robustly in her fiction in order to set her expression free of the monotonous strides and also to deride the social follies and unjust ideologies. One never fails to locate the themes as varied as that of corruption, nepotism and decline in moral values being ridiculed robustly and hammered in the guise of this extremely challenging approach. The present article seeks to critically examine as to how these devices are emphatically employed by Githa Hariharan in her second novel The Ghosts of Vasumaster not only to explore the obscure terrains of human psyche but also to deride the self-centered human life that remain deprived of ethical values. How robustly the novelist takes on the human follies and social evils in the guise of these tools, is critically examined here. The clinical efficiency with which she carries out such surgical operations is, however, not without due restraint.

Keywords: Humour, Laughter, Malice, Monotonous, Restraint, Shallowness, Wit.

I. INTRODUCTION

‘Humour’, like ‘wit’”, says MH Abrams, “denotes a species of comic” and may be termed as “any element in literature that is designed to amuse or to excite mirth in the reader or audience” (179). It, as a matter of fact, derives from the theory of the “four humours” – blood, phlegm, cholera, and melancholy - that determine a man’s nature, and from the application of the term “humorous” to one of the comically eccentric characters in the Elizabethan ‘Comedy of humours’ - a term 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 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 cast: that is, it is not cast in the neat, epigrammatic form, an aspect inherent to witty saying. Moreover ‘wit’ is always verbal, while ‘humour’ has a much broader range of reference.

A little fair distinction between ‘wit’ and ‘humour’ would therefore not be out of the place since these terms are complicatedly interlinked. ‘Wit’ specifically denotes what MH Abrams remarks “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). A fine example is the remark made by the American Comedian Abe Martin: “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). The ‘wit’ may also be subdivided into “harmless wit” and the “tendency wit” depending upon rather the laughter or smile is evoked with or without malice. It, therefore, needs to be clearly understood that “‘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” (181).

‘Humour’ and ‘wit’ as modes of expression are astutely employed in her fiction by Githa Hariharan for variety of reasons: to amuse the reader, to make his perception free of the monotonous bondages, to deride the social follies and unjust ideologies; and to emphatically depict her characters’ psyche. Using the sharp surgical edge of these tools she strives to deride the themes as varied as of corruption, nepotism and the progressive decline in moral values; and the aspects as divergent as holistic healing, the polarization of the country, techniques of education, and deeply rooted social evils like the ‘superstition’ are ridiculed in their fullest measure. “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). Well does Veena Seshadri remarks that “her writing is not without the occasional gleam of humour and she can, when she puts her mind to it, write with a rare sensitivity and restraint” (Seshadri 28). As she herself acknowledges “humour in (her) works tends to irony, wordplay and dark humour for the most part” (*Literate World*, 21/03/03).

Employing these tools to their full swing in her second novel *The Ghosts of Vasumaster*, Githa Hariharan has not only explored the obscure terrains of human psyche but has also thundered against the self-centered human life that is deprived of ethical and human values. She, therefore, has, in its true spirit, strived to expose the human follies and social evils to the core of their existence; such an exposure is, however, not without due restraint. To begin with, one can observe the fine sense of such a restraint nourished in the guise of uneasy detachment in the interaction between Vasu Master and Jameela, his wife’s childhood friend, before they did finally part away after the latter’s death: “I will keep”, says Vasumaster poignantly, “everything you and Mangala have stitched...” (69).

Through her astute analysis of human-psyche, Githa Hariharan emphatically highlights the image of woman that springs out of man’s sensual and voyeuristic obsession. She vividly brings out Vasu Master’s boyhood attraction for a young actress whose picture covered three-fourth of the calendar in his father’s room. The actress, whose name is now forgotten, “wore an emerald-green sequined cloth round her billowy breasts”, and “her hypnotic, piercing looks and the breasts which swelled out of the calendar to smother (him) were the only sights in the world which moved (him) to the point of constipation” (17). Such psychoanalysis can also be seen when Raman, Vasu’s student, drew the picture of a woman on the blackboard, with “unbelievably bulbous breasts”, and no sooner he occupied his seat, sheepish but unrepentant, than one of the boys tittered: “I had seen her breasts and I had not died of a heart attack” (61). Vasu Master duly recalls the situation when he, for the first time, met his unusual student Mani like that of “a lover who will never forget the first time he set eyes on his beloved” (11).

The pathetic condition of the Indian woman, a prime victim by virtue of her biological being and patriarchal notions, and suppressed by socio-economic ethos is vividly brought out by the novelist through what Vasu recalls of his visits to Venkatesan: his abode housing “eight children, seven of them daughters ... cramped rooms, partitioned with at least twenty curtains, his wife always hugely pregnant”. Later as the story goes an old man turns up with his only son - a serious problem to him - who lay in the bed like a log for days together leaving his fields neglected, and not less classical is the rebuke from Vasu’s father: “Do you know a father who does not consider his son a serious problem?” (194). Elsewhere he remarks: “It is a wise father that knows his own child” (114). A little later when Vasu’s grandmother lifted him by the ear and marched to his father’s room, his father, like a lofty judge, would declare: “He needs a beating once a while” (48); his expertise continues unfolding: “Children need a regular tonic; boys in particular need a canning every single day” (48-49).

Moving ahead we come across Veera Naidu’s speech at the school function overloaded with exaggeration: “Boys, teachers, and parents of PG... we are here to listen to a rare gem (Vasu Master) among teachers”; his applaud continues: “He has served our school with devotion for a lifetime...more important he has gone about his teaching duties with a sense of mission” (158). Often known to be one of the monuments of his small community Vasu’s father hails to straddle two different and not always compatible professions - “a priest who had sabotaged the physician’s knowledge; spiced it in the manner of grandmother’s messes, with three big spoonfuls of superstition for every cup of science” (224). In olden days, before the pupil moved into the teacher’s home and became part of his household, there used to be a ceremony of initiation in which “the teacher laid” what the author comments, “his right hand on the head of the pupil and became pregnant with him”, and after holding the pupil within him “for three days, he gave the pupil his second birth” (198).

The outdated and superstitious beliefs do find their due place in Hariharan’s derisive trajectory. The panchangam, for instance, distilled the riches of Hindu astronomy to specify the auspicious dates in the year “for fruitful copulation”, and as the belief goes the couple yearning for a son was advised to “wait for an even-numbered night” for “the odd days were notorious for producing daughters” (19). Hariharan, at times, continues with the allegorical mechanism to ridicule certain socio-political evils, the ones carrying due significance in contemporary politically-venomous world, the so called leaders of which often work with their vested interests; their sole success parameter being as to what extent they withstood to mislead and brainwash the people around them; their traits, are, as the novelist opines, in no way, less than those of the scorpions; and to our great relief not all their followers “could sting and kill like their master” (246), and yet it was impossible to live with them. To begin with they were deaf; the rumour was that “the scorpion poured a little of his poison into their ears once a month” that “blocked their ears and twisted their faces with the bitterness of hatred” (Ibid).

Humour in the guise of simile and the devices of comparison often acquires, in the hands of novelist, the power and shape of a surgical weapon that is effectively used by her to mend many a distortions. When Vasu Master’s father practiced his healing art, ‘his nose sniffed the air like a dissatisfied hound’ (180); and in Vasu’s life the sense of futility grows to such an extent that he feels the papers, he has prepared to deliver his lecture at school function, being carried by him “like a priest offering worship with his laden tray” (159). Once while the boys were busy dutifully scratching their pens against the papers, the teacher rightfully walked up and down, “his hands behind his back, the cane dangling loosely ... like a casual piece of good advice” (83). When a funny and disgusted Raghvan having written a little on the blackboard looked through the pile of notebooks till he found what he wanted bounced up, the moment his teacher called his name, “as if a spring was attached to his bottom”

(205), and again when the teacher asked another student Srinivas: “what does the phrase ‘my pet subject is English’ - means?” he reddened a little, “as if he had been caught making a declaration of love” (206). As the story goes Eliamma meets a stranger at sea shore whose bones jutted out in sharp angles such that “he looked skeletal in the moonlight”; his face, however, was smooth with “a sweet, gentle expression as if it belonged to a kind, benevolent uncle” (128). We recall Vasu’s memory stretching out, “like an old blanket that needs to be checked for tears and aired before winter” (100).

As the plot develops, a serious discussion between Vasu’s father and the grandmother takes place on healing therapy correlated with certain symptoms and the possible outcomes. Such discourses are often not without humorous and witty touches. Interestingly one cannot go without taking a note of how Vasu’s father interprets the Para 2, of Principles of Ayurveda, P.13:

“A person who is always complaining and finding some fault here or there, a person who shows no interest in doing all that is desired of him, has a lower than normal percentage of vata or vayu in him.” (114)

And here are the healer’s dashing calculations about such a person:

“He will never become a good leader of society. There is some danger too in this unfortunate wretch and for want of guidance he may slip into criminal practices.” (Ibid)

Vasu’s grandmother too is a lady of means and is not less calculated in her declarations. Her special chutneys, known as wisdom chutneys, are undoubtedly meant to “transform us into better human beings” (35). At another instance, Vasu Master admires his father’s ability to strip his patients of self-consciousness. One of the patients who “dreamt of being mired in filthy, sticky slush”, was “given a bottle of emerald-green fluid”, and asked to “drink (it) twice a day and always on an-empty stomach” (153), with an assurance of “dreaming of clear water” once “the bottle is finished” (Ibid). And again this is how Vasu’s grandfather diagnoses Murali, Vasu’s neighbour’s son:

“Murali - the youngest son, dark and secretive... regular bowel movements, but such predictability doesn’t augur well ... would become a clerk and enjoy it.” (112)

The prediction is soon followed by unprecedented advice:

“Introduce hot things in his diet – plenty of red chillies and jaggery” (Ibid).

The discourse by Vasu’s father about contemporary social-cultural ethos hails as a strong conviction in itself:

“We need strong young men who have convictions that bind everyone together harmoniously. We instead have young fools who run about bickering endlessly ... What do you expect of their performance in the lavatory?”(73)

The thundering voice doesn’t halt and asserts:

“I tell you, the last time an Indian had a solid bowel movement was when Gandhi drove out the British.” (Ibid)

The assertion continues unfolding itself unhesitatingly: “the day he was killed the diarrhoea began.” (Ibid)

The humorous and mirthful treatment to certain subjects in Hariharan often acquires satiric note, and she, with due precision and efficiency, derides the social follies hitting at their root. Veera Naidu, the headmaster of the school, who often motivated a certain sect of boys for social work, had his own version of SUPW – ‘the socially useful productive work’; and “by the time the boys were pronounced socially productive, they had cleaned the stinking, ever dry toilets fifty-two times a year ...” (74). And that the socially useful work is not without its due legacy is confirmed by Gopu who despite his repeated failings “seemed as confident of his mental powers as

(Vasu’s) father has been of his own”; and unsurprisingly the PG and “its failing had left no visible scar on (him)” (188).

II. CONCLUSION

Needless to say, Hariharan gives a deft stroke to her pen and strives, with witty and humorous touches to deride the aspects she is targeting to. Humour is her foray in the fictional world that vigorously wraps the social follies, the unjust ideologies and the vague human pride. The clinical efficiency with which the author hails through makes her a wizard at handling these tools.

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