

DARK HUMOUR AND LOST IDENTITIES IN THE NOVELS OF ANEES SALIM

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Abstract

This paper aims to study and illustrate how dark humour and lost identity play a major role in the novels of Anees Salim, a Kochi-based writer in English. Anees Salim won Sahitya Akademy Award in 2018 in the English language category for his novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants*. His major works include *The Small-Town Sea*, *Vanity Bagh*, *Tales from a Vending Machine* and *The Blind Lady's Descendants*. Anees Salim uses dark humour and lost identity to skilfully speak out his themes in an entertaining way and to incite serious thoughts in the readers. Secluded himself from the mainstream, the writer let his works speak to the audience on a variety of issues including marginalisation and identity crisis.

Keywords: Dark Humour, Lost Identity, Black Comedy, Anees Salim

Anees Salim is a Kochi based writer who prefers to live away from the mainstream and let his works to voice for himself. An advertising expert by profession, most of his works are set in quiet, small towns where people dream of making it big. Anees' stories are set in small towns with beautiful characterisation. Most of his characters are so familiar that the readers get involved with them without any effort. Anees seems to give voice to the unnoticed who are trying to find their own places in the society; some won some not.

The way of storytelling of Anees Salim sometimes resembles the unique style of E.M.Foster and R.K.Narayan, in his description of the locale and characterisation. His artistic use of dark humour and lost identity helps him to transform ordinary characters into extra ordinary ones. This paper is intended to examine how different novels of Anees Salim become distinct with the use of the two devices and how some serious issues are treated with a touch of dark humour. Four novels of Anees namely, *The Small-Town Sea*, *The Blind Lady's Descendants*, *The Vanity Bagh* and *Tales from a Vending Machine* have been selected for the study.

The present study attempts:

- To analyse the themes in the novels of Anees Salim with reference to the use of dark comedy and lost identity
- To study how effective is the use of dark comedy and lost identity in bringing out the conflicts in the minds of the protagonists in the novels of Anees Salim

Black Humour is a style of comedy that helps writers to discuss serious otherwise taboo subjects in a light way. Black humour is used by writers and comedians to explore vulgar issues by provoking serious thoughts in the readers. The comedy in such works is dead serious. Writers use it to explore a range of themes including the undercurrents of dysfunctional families, the strained minds of refugees, pain of loneliness, pangs of migration, the tragedy of failed states in the modern world, etc. Themes like communal violence, marginalisation, death, sex etc are also dealt with using black humour. Anees Salim makes use of the device to tactfully speak about some serious topics. His way of presenting the subject and his description of the characters through dark humour makes him different from other contemporary writers.

Dark humour is an important characteristic of Modernism and it is characterized by all the very apprehensions of Modernism. The satire of modern writers is characterised by dark humour and it evolved as a new form of modernist social satire. Dark humour presents an ugly and even desperate picture of the historical events between the World Wars. The confidence of change cannot be expected in dark humour but it offers the reader a kind of protection from lost identity and hopelessness. In modernist dark humour novels, the issue of alienation, powerlessness, absurdity, etc. were discussed thus arising the curiosity of the reader and offering opportunity to laugh and think. The comedy may be different from the traditional use of it by providing an opportunity to look one's self rather than his existence in a society.

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Originated in America in the 1960s as a modern literary genre, the name black humour derived from the portfolio of the American writer Friedman named "black humour". The origin of black humour traces back to the World War II. America's struggle in the Vietnam War, heavy casualties etc., made reverberations in the American social milieu. Panic and fear affected the American common life. Writers closely observed the situations and expressed their feelings with the help of wry humour. The term 'Black' symbolises death, fear and depression. Writers used black humour as an effective tool to express their inability to change the situation, the chaos and fear and depression that grabbed the American society in the 1960s. They used it to criticise the behavioural changes and the shift in the attitude of people due to the upheaval created by the World Wars. Authors used this modernist genre to project even taboo subjects and the stories of un identified people with some thought provoking themes.

In the works of the British writers in the world war period, the humour was darker than as they appeared in the conventional novels even though the settings and characterisation remain the same. The optimistic ending that we come across in the conventional novels is not guaranteed in the dark humour novels thus disappearing the social purpose of the modernist satire.

Dark comedy is at once horrific and hilarious which comically bears witness to the tragedy and turmoil of British life in the wake of world wars. The comic works of many British novelists between the world wars are haunted by a sense of uncertainty, absurdity and anxiety of life especially the British way of life after the world wars. Though the British literature between the world wars were filled with tragic events and unpleasant endings, there were elements of comedy in them that evoked serious thoughts in readers. All those works revolved around the themes of uncertainty, brutality of war, absurdity of modern life and turmoil of modern life. Writers like Virginia Woolf prompts readers "laughing so hard they feel as grave as corpses" (299).

The term 'black humour' signifies that it differs from the traditional humour where unpleasant thoughts give way to pleasant thoughts. In black humour however, anti-hero images were created and their words and deeds were funny. In the initial reading, readers may feel that the characters and events in black humour are funny but a close reading will make us understand that the real subject is delineated clearly.

Among the contemporary Indian Writers, Anees Salim excels in the use of dark comedy and lost identity. He is very comfortable in using the genre to express serious topics which were otherwise considered as taboo by many writers. His four major novels are very rich in this sense and a close reading of them will prove how effectively he used dark comedy as a social satire.

'The Small-Town Sea', is one of the best novels of Anees Salim. We have a nameless boy as the central character in this novel. The setting of the story is nameless, so is the father of the boy. The boy is forced to move to a small town from a big city to fulfil one of his father's last wishes. The father of the protagonist is a terminal cancer patient who wants to die in a beachside house. After the death of his father, the protagonist suffers loneliness and is sent to the unsupervised care of his grandmother. It is obvious that there are some autobiographical elements in the narration. The narrator tries to convey the unpleasant thoughts about his early childhood to the audience. His memories of those days and the unforgettable events are described with the help of dark humour.

Heart pounding, he tore open the envelope and found himself holding the first rejection letter in his life. He was nineteen then. I knew. I had heard him talk about the first rejection letter, almost with a sense of pride, as if it were a major achievement. (The Small-town Sea 4)

Almost all novels of Anees are dark but 'The Small-Town Sea' is the darkest one in the line. The novel has all the attributes of black comedy and lost identity. The terminally ill father called vappa, his street friend Bilal who partners him in boyish crimes, the injured pigeon etc., are the best examples of dark humour in the novel. The fatally ill father tries his level best to delay death but his relatives seriously discuss about his obituary. The personified sea which is present throughout the novel is addressed as "liquid desert" and "blast of white". The protagonist is removed from his surrounding and re-rooted into a quite unacquainted place where he feels a kind of insecurity. The death of his father and the remarriage of his mother further alienated the lead character from his world of unconditional love and happiness. The writer's attempt to narrate the story through an unnamed boy, whose locale and father are also nameless, has succeeded to a great extent. Lost identity of the central characters may be a comfort zone for the writer to express the rumination of his own childhood days. The story, 'The Small-Town Sea' is set on the backdrop of Anees's native village Varkala where he spent his eventful childhood along with his family.

The Blind Lady's Descendants is written as a novel-length suicide note by the protagonist, Amar Hamsa. It explores the life and self-inflicted death of the narrator. It is a compelling and evocative family saga bench marked by wry humour. Amar Hamsa, born and brought up in a crumbling house called the Bunglow, is the central character in the novel. Bad luck and tragedies tangle him right from his childhood cascading into his life. The novel traces the daily scuffles, anxieties and ambitions of a Muslim family. The story is featured with dark humour and cruel reality. Amar Hamsa, the protagonist decides to write his story at the age of twenty-six to an imaginary audience. It was a kind of suicide note. He writes about bad luck and unpleasant experiences that started right from his childhood. His mother was seen driving many nails into the front door to prevent bad luck from coming in. But Amar says that bad luck entered the house through the back door and it had become a member of the family. It finally drove him to commit

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suicide. Another element of tragedy in the story is the account of Amar's uncle Javi who committed suicide on the same day Amar was born. The readers may feel that suicides in the story could have been avoided so that it would have a hopeful ending. But while we get along with the characters, we are forced to blame the situations that lead to the tragedies and not the characters for their immature death.

The Blind Lady's Descendants is a sad story filled with dark humour and randy fantasies. The novel traces the unfortunate life of two unhappy generations of young men. None of the characters are either good or bad, every one reacts according to the situation.

'Vanity Bagh' is Anees Salim's another dark comic tale. This book is about hopelessness, distress and religious intolerance that can destroy the decorum of any community. Vanity Bagh is the tale of a boy from a minority community. The title of the novel itself is a connotation. It is the vanity bag of such people whom the so-called urban community never know. The novel is a journey through the minds of some big and small people who are pre occupied by their own vanities. The story is set in a Mohella named after the successful, rich and famous Pakistan. The protagonist Imran Jabbari may be a replica of Imran Khan the cricketer, not the politician. The Pakistani mohella is juxtaposed by Mehendi, a Hindu-majority neighbourhood. The feud, religious skirmishes, neighbourhood anxieties, religious identity crisis, marginalisation, the race of men for survival etc., are depicted in the novel with the help of dark comedy. Even in the time of unhappiness or failures, the characters enjoy the ups and downs in life. Also, the plight of the poor and importance given to the rich by the society are also dealt clearly in the novel with a stint of dark comedy.

When the rich and the famous die everyone wants their share of involvement in the funeral (VB 42)

The novel Vanity Bagh in which almost all the characters including the protagonist who were named after Pakistani leaders like Jinnah, Sharif and Zia are suffused with dark humour. Imran Jabbari and his friends play football and involve in thieving on the side. They are ready to follow the instruction given by their masters and become the pawns in the hands of gangs. Suicide, murder, bomb blast, gang wars etc., are seen in the novel 'Vanity Bagh' thus marking it as one of the best dark humour novels of Anees Salim. The novel clearly depicts the inner conflicts of Imran, the protagonist in a lucid way. His days in prison, his loneliness, appearance of Jinnah and his thoughts about the disharmony that collapsed his world, his longing for a Vanity Bagh etc are depicted with the elements of black comedy. The writer makes use of the device comfortably as a social satire in many places. His words about the prison in the novel is a good example of this.

From the outside, the prison looked like a school (the school, at first, had looked like a prison). (VB 2)

The issue of terrorism has been discussed by many Indian writers as a post-modern issue. This issue is dealt with the support to victims by Anees Salim in this novel. Imran Jabbari, the narrator is sentenced to fourteen years of imprisonment. In the prison he is given the charge of the book room and he discharges his duty with dedication. He plotted many times for jail breaking but he didn't do the crime due to his fascination to books and reading. When he opens a book, at first, he sees an alphabet, then a word, after that a sentence and then a paragraph and at last a story, the story of his ignorance and innocence. Imran narrates the story of his home town, Vanity Bagh, which is thickly populated by the representatives of Islam community. It is defence of the Muslim community in India which is always blamed for any blasts. The novel clearly depicts the reason why youths are attracted to such inhuman and anti-social activities. The 51/2 men try their level best to build their career. But they fail to do so and resorted to bad jobs. Youths like Imran Jabbari are exploited due to their ignorance. They are manipulated under the name of God or in most cases are attracted for monetary benefits.

Vanity Bagh has all the features of a black comedy and the writer uses the device to convey religious skirmishes and politics in an entertaining way. It offers dark humour and satire. Imran's people live with dons and riots, bomb blasts and gang wars. Imran gets a 16-year jail sentence just for a small gang-stuff and the story of the Mohella and Mehendi is narrated from his solitary confinement in the jail. Fallen under the hallucination of gang culture, he forms a gang named 51/2 Men and undertakes an assignment to despatch a number of stolen scooters. It was only after a serial bomb blast that Imran and his gang realise that they were booked for the crime. In the jail, Imran was assigned to the bookmaking session and whenever he opened a book and started looking at its blank pages, he sees them engraved with the tales from vanity bagh. Imran traces the animosity between the mohella and mehendi, the fever of India Pakistan cricket match, religious skirmishes etc. in the novel.

Tales from A Vending Machine is the third novel by Anees Salim published in 2013. The novel depicts several episodes from the life of Hasina Mansoor, a vending machine assistant at the Airport Department Lounge. With the scanty income that she earned by selling tea she managed to pay for the graduation of her twin sister. She also looked after her younger brother Ali. Hasina dreams to become an airhostess or a pilot. Though she is not satisfied with her present status, she is not sad. Hasina's father owns a shop which he is planning to sell to repay his debts. She is in love with her cousin Eza, who lives up-stairs. The moments with Eza gives her comfort. Hasina chats with the 'Cookie Lady' and 'Coupon Centre Man'. But her whole life changes when she finds a secret about someone who is very close to her. This destroys her and she starts hating everyone and everything. The inner conflicts of the character are clearly depicted in the novel. Though the protagonist is working as a tea vending machine assistant, her dream is to become an air hostess or a pilot. This inner struggle and dissatisfaction in the mind of Hasina is

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presented in a humorous way. There is a gap between her ultimate dream and the present status. But she is doing her job vigorously. The feud between the family of Hasina and their up-stair neighbours, who are also their relatives, is clearly depicted with fun and due gravity.

Tales from a Vending Machine is the story of a simple girl who is imaginative, committed and creative. Each take off is a great lesson for her, to fulfil her dreams to dress like air hostesses and fly high in the wings of her dream. She is the bread winner for her twin who goes to complete graduation. Haseena's sacred love with her cousin and neighbour Eza is another highlight in the novel. She is ambitious and is not ready to give up. The ups and downs in her life, her inner conflicts, her flight of imagination and her tireless and boring routine to make both ends meet etc., are dealt with the help of black comedy.

The novel is a first-person narrative. It is the frantic and illogical responses of the protagonist to events in life that the drama of the book lies. She repeatedly lies to her boss, her family and even to her own diary. She is self-pitying, sneaky and feeble. The events in the novel are narrated humorously. The life of Hasina evokes sad thoughts in the audience. The world is seen through the eyes of the protagonist, though it is not a pleasant view.

The identity crisis faced by the marginalized, religious skirmishes that are entangling our society in an alarming way, the feud among family members and neighbours, the least shared pangs of loneliness, unparalleled sufferings, deciphering one's inner fires etc., are dealt in the novels of Anees Salim. When all these themes are treated with an autobiographical note, with full of hope and expectations the enjoyment the reader gets knows no boundaries. Anees has a magical wand with him with which he incites serious thoughts in the audience. The way he deals with serious topics, the way he transforms ordinary characters into extra ordinary ones, his description of the locale, and ultimately his artistic use of dark comedy and lost identity to present the themes are really admirable. His ability to combine real landscapes with fictional characters, like the one we see in *The Small-Town Sea*, is commendable.

Imran the protagonist of *Vanity Bagh* and Hasina Mansoor the central figure in *Tales from a Vending Machine* make the readers laugh with their unique thoughts and ideas about life. But in the books of Anees Salim, humour is often dark and wry. The story of the blind lady in *The Blind Lady's Descendants* and the story of the innocent child in *The Small Town Sea* is also not different. The skill of Anees to deal serious subjects or the so-called taboo topics in a humorous way makes him different from other contemporary Indian writers.

Through his novels, Anees Salim has proved that there is nothing out there as powerful as dark humour and lost identity to expose the absurdity of modern times. Writers like Heller and Kurt Vonnegut have used black comedy as a medium to showcase the horror of war and its after effects in the countries who fought each other. The absurdity of modern life, the hypocritical approach of modern men and women, dilapidated family conditions, untold stories of the downtrodden and marginalised were used as main themes in black comedy novels.

Conclusion

Famous as one of the best raconteurs, the novels of Anees Salim are the best examples of dark humour and lost identity. The writer skilfully uses the two literary devices to speak out his thoughts in an entertaining way. Most of his works have an autobiographical note too. The lost identity of his characters is a convenient way for the writer to express the pangs of isolation and identity crisis. The novel *The Vanity Bagh* was inspired by a bitter experience of being told to go to Pakistan once he was engaged in a friendly talk. Anees writes for the marginalised and unwanted ones in the society. Some of his novels are directly political in nature and some others have a running political commentary in them. *Vanity Bagh* and *The Vicks mango Tree* are examples of this. The protagonists in Anees's novels are consummate story tellers. The unnamed hero in the novel *The Small-Town Sea*, Amar Hamsa in the novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants* are best examples of this. Use of dark comedy and lost identity is a type of comfort zone for Anees Salim, the first Sahitya Akademy award winner novelist from Kerala in fiction. The writer make use of these two powerful literary devices to proclaim his themes open which are rarely treated thus by most of the writers.

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