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EXPLORATION OF LATENT IRONY IN EXPLICIT GROTESQUERY OF
UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *WEIGHT LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

On the panorama of contemporary Indian English literature, Sahitya Academy Award Winner Upamanyu Chatterjee has carved a distinct niche for himself, as the master of grotesque, 'the witty biographer of the misfit.' He comes across as unapologetic in dealing with the most 'weird and obnoxious' in equally cynical and outrageous manner. His novels languish in all kinds of grotesquery, inside and outside, inherent in the present day conditions on social and psychological, familial and systemic levels, with a view to bring out the chaotic harmony that exists in the reality of human existence. All his protagonists are invariably seekers, having this wander lust for the meaning of life and on the lookout for some soul therapy. They are all part schizophrenic in their inability to deal with the situations they are put in. His fourth novel, *Weight Loss*, a dark comedy, was published in 2006 and was subsequently nominated by India International Centre Library, New Delhi for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for 2008. The Paper is the study of his fourth novel *Weight Loss* with the perspective of finding out the ironic vision of the novelist that is intrinsic in the contradictions and ambivalence implicit in the narrative.

Keywords: Irony, Existential dilemma, Grotesquery, Modern and post modern perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

On the panorama of contemporary Indian English literature, Upamanyu Chatterjee has carved a distinct niche for himself, as the master of grotesque, 'the witty biographer of the misfit.' (Prasannarajan) He comes across as unapologetic in dealing with the most 'weird and obnoxious' in equally cynical and outrageous manner. His novels languish in all kinds of grotesquery- inside and outside, inherent in the present day conditions on social and psychological, familial and systemic levels- with a view to bring out the chaotic harmony that exists in the reality of human existence. All his protagonists are invariably seekers, having this perpetual wander lust for the meaning of life and on the lookout for some soul therapy. They are all part schizophrenic in their inability to deal with the situations they are put in.

Weight Loss pans out the life of unconventional, morally crippled, part fantasist part confused and total deviant protagonist Bhola, who shares in common the qualities with previous Upamanyu Chatterjee heroes,

who are all the products of hybridized and compromised culture of metros of India. Bhola is intelligent, slightly obese, well-versed in literature and language, sensitive to his surroundings, and as ambivalent and reluctant as his predecessors in Chatterjee's fictional world. The thing that makes him stand apart is his sexual propensity that is far more intense, so much so that it becomes the focal point of his life as well as the novel. His libido is his malady and to get fulfill it is his only obsessive ambition in life. He doggedly, and quite successfully, works at his 'weight loss' programme that includes shedding 'weights' of all kinds – physical, mental and emotional. Thus, he continually remains preoccupied with two things in his life- running and sex that remain the part of his weight loss programme. They provide him an outlet to his overwhelming passions and help him 'to lessen the load of the lumber in his head' (Chatterjee 33).

Sex is the driving and decisive force in pathologically pervert Bhola's life and his attitude towards people around him depends on their sexual reciprocity. Sex is a depravity for him from early on in his life that makes him involve in all kinds of grotesque debauchery with everyone and anyone from teachers to landlady to roadside sadhus to servants to falling "madly in love" with a vegetable-vendor and her husband. However, there is some saving grace in the form of the transient moments of guilt, shame, profound philosophical and ethical evaluation of his deplorable state, and an inclination towards renunciation. In a fit of normalcy, in order to 'end his loneliness,' marriage takes place leading to the birth of a girl child. This brings in a turning point in his morbid life and he perceives it as getting a new lease of life in many ways. Looking at his daughter, he experiences newer emotions, so far unknown to him - tenderness and love. However, his degenerate past catches up and all his attempts to redemption are thwarted owing mainly to his own character flaw. The little yet precious moments of happiness and regeneration are short-lived and go down the drain leaving Bhola even more wretched and wrecked. The culmination of his sad life comes in the form of suicide that provides final and much sought salvation.

Analysis

Weight Loss is incoherent, bizarre, wry and undoubtedly very unaesthetic in treatment of sex. It is definitely not for the people with delicate sensibilities, high moralities or aesthetics as it takes a cruder and offensive course, intentionally though, to depict the disgust and wretchedness of the protagonist's life. Upamanyu Chatterjee is typically disposed to show the existential dilemmas in varied situations - social, bureaucratic, familial – in the most bleak and incisive manner oddly through wry and witty playfulness. *Weight Loss* is no exception. The theme chosen is that of depravity or fall of man and to show it Chatterjee has crossed all the ethical boundaries, violated all perceivable concessions that come available with such subject matters. This can be attributed mainly to the ingrained intensely cynical style and temperament of the novelist who always intends to showcase the worst, the deteriorated and the degenerate to highlight the significance of goodness, the need of improvement and scope of betterment.

The plot structure of *Weight Loss* is pretty much regular and conventional with the only difference this time as Chatterjee introduces elements of surprise and suspense and foreshadowing that were not employed as overtly in his previous works. The novel begins with the introduction of eleven year old Bhola and his craving for sex as well as a well-trimmed body. This obsession increases as the novel progresses and forces Bhola to leave his home in pursuit of lust at the age of 17. The climax is arrived with Bhola's realization of his loneliness at the age of 29 and subsequent decision to marry followed by the birth of a child. This is the point of epiphany, a transformational point that forces Bhola feel the bliss of life and compels him to make amends in his life. As it turns out to be, he is late as the events take unexpected turn and his ex-lover Moti re-appears in a bid to kill him. After this near-death experience another twist comes in the form of Titli who reverts Bhola to his lust-filled life. After this point, Bhola's disgrace is complete and his wife along with the daughter leaves him. The buildup is resolved tragically at the end by Bhola's suicide at the age of 37. Now, there are several hints dropped at places throughout the novel that foreshadow Bhola's final eventuality. There are no sub-plots, no other significant characters and the novel runs on the single track of Bhola's pathetic life.

Weight Loss is the saga of life wasted tragically. It takes bleakness, disgust and negativity to much higher level. The entire premise is very extreme and appears as a deliberate distortion, the exaggeration of

characters and situations to draw attention to the abnormal pathologies of human life. It is a manifestation of deviation from a normal condition, that seems as though, is aimed at inspiring revulsion. Though there is no direct object of satire and criticism in this fourth novel, Chatterjee's preoccupation with playfulness, sarcasm, humour and irony continues. The novel begins with a threat issued by Bhola's physical education teacher Anthony,

"Only when you die will you cease to feel ridiculous" (Chatterjee 3).

This scolding is indicative of Bhola's mental state throughout his life and of the eventuality he would meet at the end. At different points in his life Bhola realizes his misgivings and finds his future rather 'ridiculous'. Yet every time he finds himself helpless against his obsessions. This very first line is the instance of powerful dramatic irony much like the premonition or foreboding of coming events introduced at the very beginning in the Shakespearean tragedies.

The story of Bhola is that of incessant fall from grace and dignity. Nevertheless, he is an intelligent and perceptive man, and which is why, often at nights, he cannot avoid the pangs of shame and guilt that haunt him cruelly. His teenage days are sadly consumed by wasteful activities, daydreaming and sexual fantasies but at nights, in the dark, he can visualize his future with clarity, and he always finds it bleak and blank. His sinful past haunts him and the knowledge of the extent of degradation fills him up with trepidation and misery.

However- he asked himself, mesmerized by a dread of the future, with one eye clamped tight against the pillow and the other wide open, staring at the blurred contours of the book on the night table and seeing nothing- however could things have come to such a pass? Then abruptly, the extent of his fall from grace the sheer distance that he had plummeted, would strike him with fresh force and he would sit up in bed, nauseous with panic (Chatterjee 61).

Bhola's biggest malady is his inability to rein in his sex rut as one finds him hopelessly and incessantly flounder in his perversion. The reader helplessly watches Bhola make mess of his life falling deeper and deeper in the clutches of evil. Bhola is all the while conscious of his misgivings and this very consciousness constitutes the main tragic irony of the novel. His sense of guilt keeps a steady pace with his increasing sinister activities,

As the days lapsed into months and years, and he moved on past a postgraduate degree to earning a living. The sense- quite independent of an unrelated to any events- just the sense of having transgressed moved- or rather, stayed- with Bhola, a thick and slow heartbeat at the back of his head. He needed to expiate without pause, to make amends, to accept and bear the retribution (Chatterjee 238).

There is an inherent contradiction in the personality of Bhola in that his philosophical yearnings keep at par with his physical hunger. Apart from his lust addiction, he is prone to deeper philosophical and sometimes profound meditative thinking. His acutely penetrative mind keeps throwing up the age old philosophical and moral dictums and observations, which he eschews very comfortably and contorts them so as to justify his acts and situations. For instance, once while delving on one of the basic virtues of Hindu ethics *tyaga* which is sacrifice or dutiful and passive renunciation, calmly letting go of things. This virtue keeps Bhola 'intrigued' for more than a decade. He is finally able to distort it to mean 'one of the paths to release- to achieving one's true desires' (Chatterjee 305). And thus, for a decade, he let go all his bonds and attachments to achieve his true 'desire' that is 'lust'. In this way his life runs on rather 'conducive' virtues and morals that are loaded with double-meaning infusing them with ironic implications.

The birth of his daughter comes as a happy turn in his life, and one is led to feel that it is an opportunity for Bhola to cleanse his contaminated life. For the first time, he experiences the emotions hitherto unknown to him - warmth, love and a sense of belonging. This is the point of a moral awakening as a new positive light breaks through in the novel. He now wants to efface his past completely and start his domestic life afresh with his daughter, the only symbol of purity and sense in his life. But as life would have it, that very day he is shot in chest by his ex-lover Moti. Just before Moti pulls off the trigger, Bhola's conscience is churned with contrition and he sees it as God's way of giving him the much sought 'retribution' for his sins. At that very moment he vows to God-

“If I get out of this alive, I’ll be good and straight hereafter” (Chatterjee 285).

Bhola survives and feels like being blessed with the gift of second life. Being a shirker of ties and relationships all his life, for once he wants to be attached with another being, and that is his own daughter. He now wants to gain weight - of responsibilities, familial bond and love. This is his first pure and rare bond in life that is not grounded on lust. Taking his infant daughter in his lap, he feels-

Tie me down. The warmth of the weight in his lap made him feel blessed, bonded, at last as though he belonged (Chatterjee 304).

He is now filled with new positive notions of the possibility of his spiritual and moral redemption. He now wants to lead a reformed life and he says to his father,

“Life, I am beginning to learn, is both a gift and a challenge and one has to struggle to give it value” (Chatterjee 308); Life must also have a meaningful, untranscendental purpose. Strength, health and good looks mean nothing unless they conduce to self-control” (Chatterjee 309).

Unfortunately, his delusional ‘self-control’ and weak mental resolve is soon broken when Titli enters his home as a much required *aya* of his baby, and loose willed as he is, he again fails to check his lust for her. After giving vent to his weakness, he is plagued with the sense of foreboding and apprehension that things will now go permanently downhill for him and that his ultimate sentence is now impending.

In his struggle to better himself, in his mind he had already been routed, he had lost both the battle and the war, he had fallen and would continue to fall till the bus at last stopped somewhere (Chatterjee 347).

It is sheer catastrophic that despite his corrupt past, God blesses him with a beautiful gift, a child, which comes across as God’s way of offering a chance to Bhola to alleviate himself but he totally disregards and disrespects the divine intervention. His debauchery gets exposed in front of Kamala, his wife, who leaves him taking the baby along and later on divorces him. This is the final retribution and renunciation he receives from God for all his heinous deeds and moral bankruptcy. During the last four years of his life, he leads a forsaken life of a man who has gained and then lost his everything. Earlier in his life, when he ran away from the commitments and burden of ties of his family, his physical weight did not reduce despite of consistent running and exercise. But now when he longed to be tied down and gain emotional weight, his physical weight reduces considerably. This completes the tragic irony of his life. There is now nothing left for him to be done as his life has done its balancing act. Living alone in his hill station house, Bhola now reaps what he had sown. Devoid and debarred of everything in life, Bhola eventually ends his morally crippled life in the ‘Calm Centre’ made by his friends Anin and Dosto. He slits his both wrists and before dying the last image that floats in his head is that of his smiling infant daughter and he dies peacefully.

In his essay ‘Irony as Principle of a Structure,’ Cleanth Brooks asserts that,

“One can sum up modern poetic technique by calling it the rediscovery of metaphor and the full commitment to metaphor.”(Brooks)

He further adds that these metaphors, when seen in the light of the context of the work, highlight the irony inherent in the structure of the text. This theory can be safely applied on Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novels. The titles of the novels are carefully devised master metaphors that are charged with irony that permeates the entire structure of the novels. The *liet-motif* of the novels is suggested by their title. Irony emerges from the application of the master metaphors on the overall context of the novel. In other words, the meaning that issues from the analysis of the novels helps to understand the ironic image created or the strong statement being suggested by these metaphors.

In *Weight Loss*, the metaphor of ‘weight’ has double meaning. It stands for the burden of physique as well as the burden of ties and responsibilities, and Bhola wants to get rid of both. This metaphor of ‘weight’ keeps recurring throughout the novel. Bhola consistently strives to trim himself and hence has no ‘weight,’ which implies no substance and no character. His ‘weight loss programme’ reflects him as a dissolute and a shallow man. But after the birth of his daughter, Bhola tries hard to gain ‘weight,’ to feel the sweet burden of love and responsibility of his child but fails. Hence, ‘weight control’ remains elusive to him all his life.

One fact noteworthy of all Upamanyu Chatterjee novels is that all the protagonists have identical qualities- dispositions, attitudes, opinions and values. They are modern, English speaking big-city young men who possess more of western sensibility than Indian. They are intelligent, circumspect and minute observers of things around them but all are thoroughly unhappy, confused and try to grapple with their respective dilemmatic situations. Their enemy lies within as their mind is their biggest tormentor and their ultimate ambition is to be at peace with themselves. They possess similar bad qualities: abnormal sexual inclinations, obscenity, irreverence for established conventions or beliefs and indolence or inaction. There is a palpable amount of cynicism in their nature as they strangely 'relish' their loneliness and for them marriage is like 'meeting an accident on road' or 'something that happens to others.' Bhola takes both running and bisexual indulgence to extreme proportions. But despite this cynicism, the main focus does not shift from their mental turmoil, which, because of its accurate description gives a sense of verisimilitude.

Chatterjee incorporates the traits of both modernism and post-modernism in his literature. He also seeks to represent 'anarchy and dissonant realities' of contemporary times by resorting to various modernist techniques. Like Joyce, Chatterjee explores 'subjectivism,' a philosophical tenet that 'accords primacy to subjective experience as fundamental.' (Subjectivism) He does so by turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness of his protagonists. Like modernist, Chatterjee also celebrates the possibility of language in his novels in that it becomes as sophomoric as the crudity of his subject matters. For postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon, irony along with black humor is among the most central aspects of postmodernism. (Hutcheon) It is common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way. Both the elements, irony and playfulness, are the most recognizable elements in Chatterjee's writings.

To sum up, *Weight Loss*, the story of sin and retribution, has irony writ large in Bhola's life and situation. His life happens to be a futile exercise in shedding what is extraneous- weight, food, chores, relationships and, ultimately, the sap in his veins. Chatterjee in his writing is an uncompromising realist. He is evidently aware of the diseases of Indian mindset and set-up and his novels attempt to give a searing picture of that reality. The intractable approach to highlight the negativity and to hold an opinion totally in variance with accepted norms often leads to the road of criticism and unpopularity. Chatterjee has charted that course and is undeterred by critical sentiment. There is a persistent opinion in a large section of critics that Chatterjee's work is unredeemed by any positive value. But substantiating to any such view would amount to undermining the value of Chatterjee's literature as his genuine concern for growing debasement and a hope of betterment behind the façade of cynicism is too obvious to overlook. If one chooses to read between the lines, Chatterjee undoubtedly emerges from the pages of his books as a man who takes quite seriously the ethical development of his age, as opposed to conforming to the acceptable codes, as the vocation of novelist.

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