



Humour
Texts, Contexts



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CREATIVE NEW LITERATURE SERIES-160

Published by:
CREATIVE BOOKS
'SHANTI' CB-24, Naraina, New Delhi-110028
Phone: 25775818
e-mail: creativebooks2004@yahoo.com

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Edition: 2015
ISBN: 978-81-8043-117-3

Typesetting by:
PRIYANKA GRAPHICS
New Delhi

Printed by:
NICE PRINTING PRESS
Delhi

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on the coloniser's language and on the colonisers as well. The domination through language was a result of the process of colonization, the mixing of languages and the resultant variety of language is the revenge of the postcolonial nations.

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Humour and Power: Re-Reading Horror Fiction

RAJI B. NAIR

Humour of multifarious kinds has always remained an indelible part of literature. The fact that even tragedies allow for humour reveals its significance in any discourse. The present paper attempts to re-read select horror literature to analyse humour in those texts. Certain concepts like the 'uncanny' of Freud later used by Bhabha, and a few Foucauldian concepts have been employed as tools for analysis. The novellas and short stories chosen are Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial", Rudyard Kipling's "The Beast" and Mark Twain's "A Ghost Story". With the assumption that there is nothing that is apolitical, an inquiry into horror fiction has been made to see if there is any politics in such fiction. Analysis of the discourse in the chosen texts has been made to unravel the hitherto ignored aspects of the employment of humour in horror fiction.

The employment of the uncanny sustains the reader's interest in any literary work. As Andrew Bennett and Royle put it, "the power of art to disturb, defamiliarize or shake our beliefs and assumptions are intimately bound up with the uncanny" (35). *Das Unheimliche*, used by Freud refers to the uncanny or the 'unhomely' or the 'unfamiliar'. Huddart quotes

Freud's definition of the uncanny as "the frightening that goes back to what was once familiar but has long been familiar" (81-82). Huddart

... the uncanny is not something that we have invented. The feeling of uncanniness is essentially an old feeling, the old and familiar. This involuntary quality would better have remained hidden - what would better have remained hidden - what is actually something that you do not want to know. It is close to what Freud calls repetition compulsion - the way the mind repeats traumatic experiences with them. (82)

Humour definitely plays a role in stirring the realisation, first by negating it and then by affirming it the same. The service rendered by humour in this cannot be ignored easily. Humour serves as a dramatic interlude does the Shakespearean tragedy. It serves to relieve the reader and the audience of their anxiety to make the inevitable happen.

Oscar Wilde's novella *The Canterville Chase* is a haunted English country house with the name of Canterville Chase - purchased by an American family, the Otis. The happenings during the stay of the Otis family at Canterville Chase form the subject of the novella. Lord Canterville considers it his moral responsibility to tell the Otis that Canterville Chase is haunted by a ghost. The Otis wife Lucretia, their daughter Virginia, and a pair of twin boys do not believe seriously. Nobody believes in ghosts, till the day when the blood stain on the floor of the library is seen. The Otis believe in apparitions and spirits. The ghost of Lord Canterville repeatedly appears in gruesome forms: Headless Earl, a strangled Babe, the Bloodstained Moor, Jonas the Graveless, Suicide's Skeleton. These fail to terrorise the Americans. The ghost's vulnerability in his encounter with Virginia is a key to Virginia to shed tears and pray for his redemption. Virginia's innocent prayers, the ghost is able to change his present form to rest in peace in the world.

... for his deeds. She is gifted with a casket of jewels as a reward for her noble action.

The American sense of humour is highlighted by the author and after the meeting of the ghost by the members of the Otis family. The excessive show of arrogance and logic by Otis also serves to be the voice of domination. Universal laws are challenged by him when Lord Canterville cautions him of the ghost at Canterville Chase while discussing the terms of sale. Hiram Otis states seriously:

... but there is no such thing, sir, as a ghost, and I guess the laws of nature are not going to be suspended for the British aristocracy. (6)

... he adds:

... I will take the furniture and the ghost at a valuation. I have come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy ... (6)

The traditional British culture is pitted against the modern American culture. Many instances could be cited from the text which reveals equations of power as well. Mrs. Umney, the housekeeper tells the family that the bloodstain on library floor must not be removed and that it dated back to 1575 when Lady de Canterville was murdered by her husband, Sir de Canterville. Immediately Washington Otis comes with "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Eucalypt" blotting out the stain completely, followed by a clap of thunder and lightning. Mrs. Umney faints, and the American Minister advises his wife to "charge it to her, like a man" (10) to prevent her from fainting any further. The contrast between the two cultures is humorously presented. In the British culture looks at fainting as a dignified delicate feminine action, the Americans hail boldness and offers a paternalistic correction for expressions of such delicate dignity. When Mr. Otis first encounters the ghost, instead of getting terrified and scared, he presents the ghost with a typical American brand, the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, for he believes the creaky chains need proper oiling. The humiliated ghost throws the bottle violently on the floor and moves to the top of the oak staircase only to be attacked by a large pillow (which

whizzes past his head) thrown by the twins. The renewed blood-stain despite locking the library doors convinced the family of the presence of the ghost, but they remain unperturbed. The ghost is presented in a highly pathetic manner when Mr. Otis and the twins see him injured with a large old armour seated on a high backed chair. The ghost is ordered to "hold up his hands" by Mr. Otis "in accordance with Californian etiquette" and the twins shoot two pellets with pea-shooters which compel the ghost to flee from them as he does (25). He manages to extinguish Otis' candle leaving them in total darkness with his "celebrated peal of demoniac laughter" (25) which had been effective in the past. Wilde details out the episode stating that the laughter

... was said to have turned Lord Raker's wig grey in a single night, and had certainly made three of Lady Canterville's French governesses give warning before their month was up. He accordingly laughed till the most horrible laugh, till the old vaulted roof rang and rang again, till hardly had the fearful echo died away when a door opened, and Mr. Otis came out in a light blue dressing gown. "I am afraid you are not from well," she said, "and have brought you a bottle of Doctor Dobell's tincture. If it is indigestion, you will find it a most excellent remedy." (25-26)

This was insulting that the demoniac laughter had sounded to Mrs. Otis as an eerie noise due to some ailment which she materialistically wishes to treat with Dobell's tincture: The gross materialism of American culture is represented by Wilde through these typical American brand names like the Pinkerton's Stain remover, Tammany Lubricator, and Dobell's tincture which seem to be equally applicable to the mortal as well as the spirit world for the Americans.

Wilde's infusion of humour into the text comes with his journeying into the ghost's self to present the agonies and anxieties of the ghost which is usually never attempted by writers. During one of his nightly adventures to frighten the Otis family, the ghost comes across another ghost and never having encountered another ghost, gets terribly frightened and flees to his abode. After pondering for some time he decides to make friends with the new phantom thinking that "two ghosts

are better than one" (30). But on reaching the spot he meets with a terrible sight:

Something had evidently happened to the spectre, for the light had entirely faded from its hollow eyes, . . . and it was leaning up against the wall in a strained and uncomfortable attitude. He rushed forward and seized it in his arms, when, to his horror, the head slipped off and rolled on the floor, the body assumed a recumbent posture, and he found himself clasping a white dimity bed-curtain, with a sweeping brush, a kitchen cleaver, and a hollow turnip lying at his feet! (30)

The British ancestral ghost realises that he has been outwitted by the American twins. Usually omniscient narrators stay at a distance from ghosts, never attempting to understand the ghost's psyche (if at all it has one). When ghosts are given speech and thought by the writer, humour arises. Immanuel Kant suggests that "Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (199). When the figures that give rise to the uncanny remain without speech it becomes truly disturbing enhancing the element of horror.

The uncanny made light and harmless is re-established with the disappearance of Virginia when the entire family worriedly and fervently search for the girl among the gypsies and in the nearby villages. The logical presumptions of the Otises and the practical jokes of the twins cease. The search is in vain as it is revealed to the reader that the girl departed with the ghost through the wainscoting to some unknown world unknown to mortals. The commonsense logic and the presumptuous knowledge of the Americans fall flat when Virginia comes back declaring that she had been with the ghost, and leads them all down a secret corridor to a little low room where they see a gaunt skeleton chained to a huge iron ring on the wall. The skeleton was "... stretched out at full length on the stone floor, and seemed to be trying to grasp with its long fleshless fingers an old fashioned trencher and ewer, that were placed just out of its reach" (60). The secret of the terrible tragedy was now disclosed to them.

Wilde reinstates British honour after giving ample space for American boldness to strut. Virginia is rewarded with a casket

of precious jewels and an aristocratic British husband because of her subservience to and compassionate understanding of the ghost. Unlike the others she does not ridicule or trouble the ghost but tries to understand his desire to rest in peace in the garden of death. She accompanies the ghost to the Angel of Death to beg mercy by weeping for his sins and praying for him without any fear or thoughts of any favours from any power. Virginia sees him as a repentant soul who had been seen with sympathy and forgiveness for three hundred years and learned lessons on life, death and love. The novella turns out to be a clear instance of reinstating the uncanny after undoing it. The uncanny is detailed out by detailing out the pathetically humorous preparations made by the old ghost to terrify and terrify people. Humour, though it may sound odd, can be used to heighten the merit of the reinstatement of the uncanny in any literary text. One finds in horror fiction a topsy-turvy of all the logical western knowledge and pretensions of logic and pronouncements. Horror fiction in general could be read as a deconstruction of all established knowledge patterns. One cannot state anything conclusively as the uncanny always remains so however hard one tries to reveal the mysterious.

Edgar Allen Poe's "The Premature Burial" presents the horror of premature burial with a narration of real-life experiences of men and women with sepulchral experiences. The "uncanny" which is quite prominent in the first half of the story is made to mount rather high with the narrator's serious preparation of the special coffin for himself. The removal of the family vault (so that it could be opened from within) is also done surmising a premature burial following catastrophe. The horror again enhances the uncanny in the story when the narrator talks of an actual experience of opening his heavy eyelids to see darkness and only darkness everywhere with a solid wooden substance, which extended above my head at an elevation of not more than six inches from my feet, which confirms for him, and also for the reader, his place within the coffin.

Thinking that he had been unceremoniously buried in a remote part of the world away from his family vault, following a seizure and death-like stillness, he issues forth a shriek

... resounded through the realms of the Arabian night" (260) till he is seized and shaken "without mercy" by very rough looking individuals accompanied by a woman which strikes the humorous note- "what do you mean by laughing in that ere kind of style, like a cattymount?" (260). The narrator had gone on a gunning expedition with a friend and they were overtaken by a storm. They had taken shelter in the cabin of a small sloop and the narrator had managed to squeeze himself in to one of the only two berths available. The men who shook him were "the crew of the sloop and some others engaged to unload it" (261). The uncanny is made a bit homely and victory is granted to western logicity but only for a while. The narrator details out the positives of the experience which made him take vigorous exercise and set aside thoughts of death but winds up the story with a remark which only reloads the uncanny. This befits the concept of the maintenance of the uncanny in literary works. The narrator winds up the story thus: "... the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful- but, . . . they must be feared or they will devour us- they must be suffered to slumber, or perish" (261).

The colonization of the human mind by thoughts of death - the colonizer - leads to instances of the development of the uncanny. The uncanny thus turns out to be a part of ourselves, a foreign element is very much alive within us, as stated by Freud and Bhabha in different contexts. As Huddart puts it,

For Freud this self [adult] never gets rid of these 'inappropriate' characteristics, particularly those of childhood. In fact, the uncanny or improper is built into the foundations of psychological experience, and remains a partial presence in what is apparently most proper . . .

However, the structure of the uncanny is so similar to that of general psychoanalytic structures that the idea can be used to explain real events, individuals and institutions. (83)

Humour is again brought to the service of detailing out the relations of power among nations referred to in texts. There is a intricate connection between power and the uncanny and humour and uncanny when employed in the right proportion creates remarkable fiction which works on another level, that

of power relations between nations represented by explicitly innocent characters. Rudyard Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" is one such work where India is pitted against England. The story commences with the statement: "Your gods and my gods do you or I know which are the stronger?" (503). Fleete, a British companion of the narrator, saturated with too much of liquor enters a Hanuman temple. The "genial and inoffensive man" turns riotous after a heavy intake of liquor, starting with sherry and bitters, moving through Champagne and 'rasping Capri with all the strength of whisky to old Brandy. Fleete "... dashed up the steps, patted two priests on the back, and was gravely grinding the ashes of his cigar-butt into the forehead of the red stone image of Hanuman (505). Though Strickland, a friend and British Police official tries to drag him out, he sits down and refuses to budge stating: "Shee that? Mark of the B-bbeast I made it. Ishn't it fine?" (505). He also adds that good old Hanuman made a very soft pillow (505). The typical Kipling statements sprinkle humour and this weirdly humorous and the uncanny merge when the figure of the "Silver Man", "a leper of some years' standing" emerge from behind the image of the God (505). The uncanny is presented via the figure of the "Silver Man" who has no face and speech, mewing like an otter, who rushes to Fleete and drops his head to the left breast of Fleete's

The figure of a monkey-god is cause enough for laughter to a westerner. From behind the image of this monkey god emerges the figure that bewitches the Englishman in a bestial way. Humour and horror alternate when the bewitched man, Fleete, demands "underdone chops" repeatedly and talks of the queer mosquitoes that have bitten him ruthlessly "but only in one place" (507). On inspection the bitten place turns out to be where the Silver Man had nuzzled which has become a mark which looks like "the five or six irregular blotches arranged in a circle - on a leopard's hide" (507) which grows blacker. Humour usually gives rise to laughter in the mind of the reader and among the characters. Bennett and Royle refer to the 'Superiority Theory' of laughter proposed by the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes: "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison

with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 16).

We laugh according to this argument out of a sense of superiority - the 'sudden glory' or 'conception of eminency' in relation to the stupidity or weakness of others, or of ourselves some point in the past.

Bestial mannerisms are shown by Fleete, though he seems unaware of that himself. A humorous instance is again when Fleete brags of complete obedience from his mare cautioned by Strickland not to enter the stable as the mares seem to get irritated and even panicky in his presence.

'Nonsense,' said Fleete, 'my mare will follow me like a dog.' He went to her; she was in a loose-box; but as he slipped the bars she plunged, knocked him down and broke away into the garden. I laughed, but Strickland was not amused. He took his moustache in both fists and pulled at it till it nearly came out. (508-509)

Fleete is seen grovelling about the garden on his hands and knees under the orange-bushes eliciting angry remarks from an irritated Strickland who is almost thrown off his horse which bolts at the sight of Fleete. The purely uncanny is presented as there is a total transformation of Fleete into a dog-like-beast howling and snarling, with a doctor pronouncing the ailment as hydrophobia. The silver Man prowls about the yard of Strickland till he is tied up and compelled to remove the affliction on Fleete. One is given the impression that the leper had the power to blow out the affliction or affliction from Fleete just as he had the power to catch him as a punishment for polluting the image of a human. The uncanny presented by the Silver Man is made good by its uncanny nature to an extent but much is seriously left unsaid by Kipling which in turn enhances the uncanny. Though Fleete is finally cured of his bestial affliction and becomes a normal man, there are many things about the silver man spirit world which contribute to the uncanny in the text. The West is pitted against the East where the West - represented by Strickland and the narrator (more than Fleete) - seems to control the East, represented by the Silver Man. The humour in the text is intended only to lighten the burden of the

uncanny on the reader. Despite British attempts to dominate the East – represented by Hindu religion – the West is made to acknowledge a primitive spirit world of the East which might be looked upon as the uncanny or the return of the repressed familiar primitive world, something which the Western modernity would prefer not to admit as a reality.

In Bhabha's discussions, Western modernity becomes the analysand and the postcolonial critic with his postcolonial perspective becomes the analyst. The pre-colonial and colonial past remain uncanny for the analysand which is akin to the repressions of childhood which the analysand would wish never to appear again. Similar is the case with this story where the British author wishes to make light the uncanny – by employing humour – longing that it would put down the East's upper hand in internally terrorising the coloniser. But right within the story statements are made which reveal the powers of the primeval past of India – represented by the Silver Man – which cannot be denied and which emerge unasked for like the repressions of the mind which remain uncanny and emerge without any prior warning. Humour is thus employed to negate the uncanny but it serves only to emphasize the same. With the affirmation of the uncanny the concepts of the logicity of western knowledge systems are quashed to the ground which leaves behind many equations of power unsolved.

Mark Twain's "A Ghost Story" humorously presents the narrator's encounter with the ghost of the Cardiff Giant whose body is kept in a museum across the street of the old mansion where the narrator takes residence. The story narrates in first person the experiences of occupying a large room in a huge old building far up Broadway. The uncanny in the text commences with the narrator waking up from a profound sleep experiencing a powerful tugging of the bed clothes and blankets by unseen hands and listens to heavy elephantine tread within the room. The narrator sees "little spheres of phosphorescent light" (633) in the room:

... and presently was a conscious of a huge cloudy presence before me. I watched it with fascinated eyes. A pale glow stole over the Thing; gradually its cloudy folds took shape – an arm appeared, then legs, then a body, and last a great sad face looked out of the vapour

whipped of its filmy housings, naked, muscular and comely, the majestic Cardiff Giant loomed above me! (633-634)

moments of laughter are raised with the appearance of the ghost Cardiff Giant who possesses a "benignant countenance" (634). The gentle face of the huge ghost brings back the cheerful mood of the narrator. As the giant ghost sits on the chairs and bed of the narrator, all fall to ruins, eliciting worried chiding from the narrator:

How what sort of a way is that to do? First you come lumbering about the place bringing a legion of vagabond goblins along with you to worry me to death, and then when I overlook an indelicacy of costume which would not be tolerated anywhere by cultivated people except in a respectable theatre, and not even there if the nudity were of YOUR sex, you repay me by wrecking all the furniture you can find to sit down on. (634)

In this tale where the uncanny is reduced to the maximum through the friendly conversation between the narrator and the ghost, it could be argued that the uncanny is not re-established as in the other stories discussed. The ghost confesses that he would have no rest or peace till a proper burial is given to his body. He had tried haunting the museum at midnight but as his body visits the place at night he had thought of getting a good night's sleep by haunting the place where the narrator was. The ghost remains pitifully humiliated when the narrator blurts out:

Why you poor blundering old fossil, you have had all your trouble for nothing – you have been haunting a PLASTER CAST of yourself – the real Cardiff Giant is in Albany! (636)

The narrator adds a footnote:

The original fraud was ingeniously and fraudfully duplicated, and exhibited in New York as the "only genuine" Cardiff Giant (to the unspeakable disgust of the owners of the real colossus) at the very same time that the latter was drawing crowds at a museum in Albany. (636)

The ghost pleads with the narrator:

My son, if there is any charity left in your heart for a poor friendless phantom like me, don't let this get out. Think how YOU would feel if you had made such an ass of yourself. (637)

The narrator leaves unsaid whether the ghost goes to haunt the place where the original body was laid.

Though the ghost of the Cardiff Giant is shown by Twain as being tricked by the fraudulence of the modern world in believing the plaster cast of his body as his real mortal remains - which evokes pathetic humour - the ultimate statement of the story seems to be the fact that there are ghosts despite the advance of science in the modern world. It is true that the plaster cast looks so real that even the spirit that owned the body is unable to make out that it is not its original body. Though Twain humorously talks of the powers of contemporary modernity to trick even supernatural beings, he is not seen denying the existence of supernatural powers which clearly goes against the bragging logicity and reasoning skills of all established realms of contemporary knowledge.

It is a theorising of the humour in horror literature that has been attempted in the present paper. Horror fiction in general seems to laugh at the ways in which Western knowledge's logic and universal pretensions get easily undermined. Nations vary in their documentation of the ordered knowledge of the world. The ghost literatures of different nations consciously and unconsciously reflect their positions in the power structure through certain harmlessly humorous, sometimes weirdly humorous and at times pathetically humorous instances. The paper has also casually attempted to glance at the difference in the approach of writers of various nations as they incorporate characters with different nationalities in their horror fiction.

In some texts of horror fiction one perceives clear instances of power play where humour serves to enhance the merit of the topsy-turvyng of regular beliefs which form a part of the knowledge systems of the West. There is always an immutable gulf between those who wield power and those who undergo it. Humour could be seen as mediating this gulf. The uncanny pertaining to those who undergo power threatens even the ones who wield power. Humour and the uncanny are employed in a precarious balance by master craftsmen to prove that the ones who wield power are not invincible and that the uncanny can be a factor in unsettling and dismantling the ones in power. The codified realms of knowledge of the owners of power

...ing to logic and reasoning are impelled to topple down the manifestation of the inexplicable in the uncanny. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* one may have to say that "There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in philosophy" (232). The use of humour may explicitly seem to stabilize the uncanny nature of such 'things', but in reality the stature of these 'things' gets enhanced and is moved beyond the realm of all explanation and rationality. Pretensions of various knowledge systems are laid to rest by great writers through their presentation of horror stories in general and by the incorporation of humour in particular. Finally this paper also shows how hearty humour could be used dry of its juicy laughter to leave behind the mere bones of theory.

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