

## **Humour Through Incongruity in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

**Sagarika Chattopadhyay**

**Research Scholar**

**School of Humanities & Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Indore**

**India**

**Amarjeet Nayak**

**Assistant Professor in English**

**Indian Institute of Technology Indore**

**India**

### **Abstract:**

*Humour as a literary device is mainly explored to see how a geographical imaginary is evoked in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies. Humour is being studied from the perspective of incongruity, or juxtaposition of mismatched cultural frames, that compel the reader to understand the discourse at hand differently through distant reading as suggested by Franco Moretti. The use of tropes will also look at a historical consciousness in the narrative as a deliberate move by the narrator in driving the discourse in a direction that does not limit reading the humorous event as merely postcolonial or imperial. Rather it opens up the space to understand strands of life in the Indian context which were integral to its culture and people.*

**Keywords:** Humour, geographical imaginary, incongruity, space, culture

Humour can be seen as pervading almost all aspects of human social life and is seen nearer to comic amusement, a mental state that is telling about its nature in Noel Carroll's terms. Studies in humour have shown the fallibility in defining the concept for its spreading two major areas firstly, philosophical ethics and secondly, Anglo-American tradition. Philosophical ethics calls the comic as the faculty of causing laughter or amusement while the latter assumes it in more neutral terms, as in daily language - all the phenomena in it.

Humour in *Sea Of Poppies* is being ascribed to from the perspective of literary device used in the text. But this usage is contextual to the notion of distant reading as proposed by Franco Moretti, in a bid to understand texts that fall outside the convention of European or British novels. Distant reading can be done by using literary devices, themes, tropes, genres and systems, to read texts in new ways. The theme of Bhakti and humour are used to explore the mismatch of foreign material and local form so as to be able to have a sensitive reading of instances in the text that are heavily imbued with cultural tropes. Humour is being studied from the perspective of incongruity, or juxtaposition of mismatched cultural frames, that compel the reader to understand the discourse at hand differently. The trope of irony, catachresis in particular is employed using examples from the text. The use of tropes will also look at a historical consciousness in the narrative as a deliberate move by the narrator in driving the discourse in a direction that does not limit reading the humorous event as merely postcolonial or imperial. Rather it opens up the space to understand strands of life in the Indian context which were integral to its culture and people. Humour as narrative event forms part of a small explication to push forth the point as to how the narrative breaks the seriousness of the context at hand to present an issue that is integral to the Indian way of life. Space creation from a narrative perspective is also looked at. And all the above considerations are brought together to explore what kind of geographic imaginary gets created within the text.

The aspect of humor strongly underpins a sociological critique of events and circumstances and in that facilitates the primary contention of staging of foreign form and local material. According to Mary Douglas, humor works as a tool of social empowerment, leveling social hierarchies. This is an important idea since humor works effectively in the novels of Ghosh as a mode to assert space for cultural contexts that are foreign and unfamiliar within the setting of the text that is imperial in the socio-historical context. But even when read today, that is in the postcolonial setting, it raises questions regarding those very cultural contexts remaining unexplained and unaccommodative so far as the form of the novel is concerned. For example, the irrationality of Baboo Nob Kissin's behavior embeds a way of life (bhakti or devotion), which governed a large populace within the Indian sub continent. The path of devotion was vast and intricate offering many choices for people to opt from, and following these pathways created for them self identity and a mode of self assertion. Moretti's claim that foreign presence makes local characters behave in strange ways appears true when one studies the character of Nob Kissin in particular, but the

text does not allow the strange behavior to get lost in the maze of storytelling. Instead the narrative event of Nob Kissin's appearance in conjunction with Zachary is made overtly visible, lifting every instance out of the mode of the texts' storytelling. An event according Peter Huhn, in narratology is one that affects a significant change of a special kind in the sense of being decisive and bringing about unpredictable turn in the narrated happenings, a deviation from the normal, expected course of things (81). This change is brought about with the help of a character with reference to a social context that acquires special relevance such that the event is a deviation from what is normal and expected (81). Though the scope of this study is not rooted in a narratological analysis, the recurrence of the funny scenes between Nob Kissin and Zachary foregrounds a narrator who is deliberate in staging these events that mark a departure from the seriousness of the context at hand and also breaks the chronology of the text in seeming not to fit in with the logical and sequential progression of the text. There are a few interesting points to consider here, first what does this kind of staging do for the text spatially, where spatiality is considered from the perspective of the form of the novel (a character who seems to be problematising the national space- the inner and outer domains- when viewed through the eyes of Baboo Nob Kissin from inside and Zachary from outside), and humorous space (the discourse of humour and how it opens up space for alternative interpretation).

### **Humour through Incongruity**

In yolking together Nob Kissin with Zachary, cross cultural frames are made to clash and the incongruity that emerges, opens up spaces for interpretation that would otherwise have remained unexplored buried under the semantics of an oriental discourse. Neal Norrick, adds that "diversities in life experiences can strike as funny and tellers may use them as a form of narrative humor. Variations between cultures.....provide obvious sources of humor" (86). According to Norrick, humour is used to disrupt normal communication "forcing hearers to make sense of some incongruity, to discard contextually obvious meanings" (88). This premise can be explored through a humorous interaction between Nob Kissin Baboo and Zachary. The former looks upon Zachary as an incarnation of Krishna, the dark skinned lord, and searches for tangible clues to confirm his belief. Unable to satisfy his curiosity, Nob Kissin advances towards Zachary's neck to see if it is blue, fashioned after another powerful god in the Hindu pantheon, Shiva, the god of destruction, also known as Neel Kunth, or the blue throated one.

“Startled by the gomusta’s lunge, Zachary was quick enough to slap his hand away...’You crazy or something?’ Chastened, the gomusta dropped his hands. ‘Nothing, sir,’ he said, ‘just only checking if kunth is blue.’ ‘If what is *what?*’...’ You cussing me now?’” (147).

The incongruity in this interaction is funny since Nob Kissin’s innocent enquiry after Zachary’s neck or Kunth being blue, is misunderstood by Zachary as a pejorative remark. The incongruity of cross cultural frames can be viewed as being in diametrical opposition to each other. The blue Kunth of Shiva, is symbolic of continence, a state wherein a vice is held within oneself and slowly transformed. But Zachary’s understanding of Kunth as a cuss word could be interpreted as a site of sin. The cussing may also be looked upon as castration of Zachary’s manhood in a bid to feminize him by associating him with the female genitalia. The incongruity is not only left unresolved with every attempt by Nob Kissin to divinize Zachary which the latter regards with suspicion, but diligently asserted through every interaction between the two throughout the text. If the given instance is looked at from the point of view of incongruity theory as proposed by Schopenhauer, according to whom, incongruity occurs when two objects are thought through one concept and “the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects: it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was applicable to them from a one sided point of view” (13). If viewed from the lens of oriental discourse applying Schopenhauer’s theory could be deduced in two ways. One, Baboo Nob Kissin, is indeed a “Baboon” (164), a ridiculous figure harnessing outlandish notions of personality worship towards Zachary as god incarnate, completely outside the understanding of a culturally foreign reader of the text. Also Zachary, could be seen as a tolerant man who apart from his surprise towards Nob Kissin, remains civil towards him, upholding the image of the refined Occident gentleman. However well both the characters may be subsumed under oriental semantics, when viewed from an Indian way of thinking, Nob Kissin, does not appear out rightly ludicrous, despite the humor being retained on account of the clash of cultural frames and the sharp contrast that emerges when a culturally knowing reader perceives the interaction between these two figures. Another example of incongruity can be understood through the following illustration. Interspersed in the middle of the very important activity of acquiring official documents from Zachary, the second mate of the ship Ibis, Nob Kissin’s ears hear the sounds of

the sea shanty 'Heave away Cheerily' on Zachary's penny whistle which lead him to go into fantastical imaginations about Zachary being the possible avatar of Krishna, a vision he has starved for so long. "Was it really a flute, Lord Krishna's own instrument, that had started to play....although the tune was unfamiliar in itself, was set to Gurjari, one of the most favoured ragas for the singing of the Dark Lord's song" (145). The sea shanty that Baboo Nob Kissin chances upon is a form of work song sung by the sea crew in chorus, while performing group activities like the process of loading cargo, setting sail or pushing and pulling. The shanties were considered to be influenced by songs of African Americans, while loading cotton bales in Southern America. Zachary's humming of this tune hearkens to his own African American roots, being the son of a Maryland freedwoman. The incongruity between a sea shanty and Gurjari raag is apparent, but for Nob Kissin's imagination given to irrationality. The irrational permeates Baboo Nob Kissin's outer domain, and yet this very outer domain is a site for all rational activities efficiently executed by him. A simplistic dismissal of faith as irrational may not be entirely justified given Bhakti or devotion as an immensely important way of the inner or spiritual domain in the Indian way of life. In the post-Chaitanya<sup>i</sup> phase, one of the fundamental devotional attitude of Bhakti was called raganuga Bhakti, originating from an unbearable desire or thirst for God in the being of the devotee. One of the methods of practice of this form of Bhakti allowed its followers to practice the faith "while participating in the ritual procedures of social and personal life as laid down by the shastras" (Chatterjee 184).

This consistency of Nob Kissin's devotional hilariousness alludes to the incessantness with which the path of devotion is practiced as a way of life. AK Ramanujan's essay "Is There An Indian Way of Thinking" attempts at fleshing out the 'Indian' as highly inconsistent. Drawing from his father's example who was a south Indian Brahman gentleman, Ramanujan explains how his clothes though representative of his inner life were interspersed with Western influences. A Mathematician and a Sanskrit scholar, he was visited by mathematicians from abroad and local astrologers alike. Ramanujan's scientific temper would find it difficult to reconcile the ease and intelligence with which his father would resolve so called dichotomies which did not seem compatible to him at all. This suggests a sort of cohesion in the Indian way of thinking, a cohesion that does not necessarily distinguish between the outer and inner. Alluding to the often illustrated example from *A Passage to India*, Mrs. Moore is found musing over the indeterminacy between inside and outside in India. Referring to a wasp that has perched

itself on a peg she thinks, “Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch...Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside the house as out, it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses, trees”(Forster, 30).

This reference especially speaks to the dichotomies found in Baboo Nob Kissin’s character. One finds in Baboo Nob Kissin’s character shrewdness and intelligence which he uses to further the interests of his British employers. But despite his strengths Nob Kissin does not take offence at the insults hurled at him by them. There is an innocence in Nob Kissin that even insults that connote a deity in some remote or lewd fashion instead of causing pain to him becomes a reason to be free from it. For example, Burnham “often mocked his gomusta by addressing him as ‘my Nut Kissing Baboon’... ‘baboon’, in any case, was not a term to which Baboo Nob Kissin could really object, since that creature was but an avatar of Lord Hanuman (164). According to Partha Chatterjee, anticolonial nationalism was divided into two domains, the material and the spiritual. “The material is the domain of the “outside”” (Chatterjee, 6), represented by economy, statecraft, science and technology etc. This is the domain of Western supremacy which had to be acknowledged and “its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated” (6). The spiritual on the other hand denotes the inner domain which is marked by the essential cultural identity (6). Therefore living, especially in the colonial metropolis was two pronged, first being the imitation of the Western skills in the material domain or the ‘outside’ which necessitated a drive to “preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture” (6) or the inside. Another important argument that Chatterjee makes is that the ‘outside’ is “where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male” (120). Keeping in mind Chatterjee’s premise, cohesion between the inner and the outer maybe looked at in novel ways through Baboo Nob Kissin’s character, the outer landscape of whose life is an expression of his inner landscape, defined by a strong faith or Bhakti towards his chosen deity, Krishna.

Nob Kissin’s divine aspiration to have the vision of Krishna be united with him takes him on a journey from Ahiritola, “an inexpensive waterfront neighbourhood of Calcutta” (162) to the center of the metropolis. The metropolis is a signifier of the seat of imperial activity, a space governed by authority and practical pursuits and conquests, making it very masculine in nature. Nobo Krishno’s journey takes place at the behest of Ma Taramony, his spiritually evolved aunt according to whom Nobo Krishno must go out from the inner sanctum of a dedicated life of the bhakta to becoming a man of the world, earning money to fulfill the dream of building a Krishna

temple. The space of bhakti is internal to a being, governed by love, surrender, and the unseen because there is little to show in terms of manifest outcomes, therefore from that aspect the nature of bhakti could be looked upon as feminine. Here surrender must not be understood as subjugation but an outlook that looks beyond dichotomies of inner or outer, spiritual or secular, or even conqueror and conquered, since the objective is union with the divine, and the material dichotomies are but pathways that one must traverse to reach the ultimate goal. Chatterjee talks of various internal differentiations within the Vaishnava stream of bhakti, in its practice and attainment of spiritual realization. For example, in the parakiya bhava, the devotee looks at himself or herself as Radha, desiring for Krishna as his or her illicit lover. Ramanujan comments that the parakiya bhava, where in the word parakiya, means another's',

“To unite with another's' woman is more poignant...in the search for a state beyond social good and evil; another's' woman, unlike one's own wife, is inaccessible, and in being so gives the devotee a hint of the inaccessibility of the lord himself” (329).

This also well explains the notion of surrender where the path of devotion does not guarantee success or achievement, but the joy of devotion lies in following the path. “Ma Taramony...had promised him that his awakening was at hand...which were sure to be manifested in the unlikeliest places and in the most improbable forms”(145). Zachary occupies a somewhat middle space, that is neither fully invested in plying the opium trade nor therefore not directly involved in imperial motivations and yet foreign to Nob Kissin's bhakti. Despite repeated rebuttals from a confused Zachary to Baboo Nob Kissin's hints and clues to him about Zachary's being the reincarnation of Krishna, Nob Kissin's faith remains unshaken. Zachary is the inaccessible goal offering no semblance of any hope towards Nob Kissin's fulfillment of the prophecy. In another form of Vaishnava bhakti called the sahaja bhava, it is believed that the true spiritual self resides in the body and through the discipline of practices one could realize the union of Krishna and Radha within one's own body that too without denying or annihilating one's physical existence (185). Baboo Nobo Krishno is acutely aware of Ma Taramony's presence growing within him, and the consequent arousal of deeply maternal feelings towards Neel, the zamindar of Rashkhali, whose downfall has occurred at the hands of Baboo Nob Kissin himself. The growing maternal instinct also manifests itself in Nobo Krishno's physical appearance and that problematises the

space of the Ibis, which is very masculine in nature. “Every day offered some fresh sign of the growing fullness of the womanly presence inside him—for example, his mounting revulsion at the maistries and silahdars...when he heard them speak of breasts and buttocks”(423). In the former, his career as gomusta and fulfilling of his duties thereof, all the while the rationale of ‘success’ in the metropolis is altogether different from the rationale that governs bhakti as a way of life, in and through the various differentiations that are charted within the bhakti movement. Chatterjee comments well when he articulates,

“It is well apparent from the histories of minor sects that the varying intensities of their affiliation with the larger unity, the degree of “eclecticism,” the varying measures and subtleties in emphasizing their difference and their self-identity reveal not so much the desire to create a new universalist system but rather varying strategies of survival, and of self assertion.” (186)

It will be appropriate to conclude that these differentiations are such that some conform with scriptural injunctions to a greater degree for example in the practice of purushabhimana or self-effacement as the way to worship Krishna, and some others that offer bifurcations that are looked upon as deviant, like the Sahajiya bhava, that considers the spiritual self invested within the being and may be realized through the gradual transformation of love from gross desires to divine love.

**End Notes:**

- i. A great saint, who considered himself Krishna's lover represented by Radha.

**References:**

- Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Canada: University of Toronto Press. 1999.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragment*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1994.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Viking. 2008.
- Huhn, Peter. "Event and Eventfulness". In *Handbook of Narratology*. Eds. Peter Huhn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid, et al. New York: Walter De Gruyter. 2009. 80-97.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Epic and Novel in India". *The Novel: History, Geography and Culture*. Ed. Franco Moretti. Princeton: Princeton University Press (2006). 596-631.
- Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature". *New Left review* 1 (2000): 54-68.
- Norricks, Neal R. 2007. Conversational storytelling. *The Cambridge companion to narrative*, ed. by David Herman, 127-141. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norricks, Ned.R. "Humor in Oral History Narratives" *Oral History*. 34.2(2006): 85-94.
- Ramanujan, A.K. *The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2014.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea Vol.II*. Trans. R.B Halden and J. Kemp. Boston: Ticknor and Company. 1887.
- Sole, Kelwyn. "'The Deep Thoughts The One in Need Falls Into': Quotidian Experience and Perspectives of Poetry in Postliberation South Africa". In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunl et al. Durnham: Duke University Press. 2005. 182-205.
- Ermida, Isabel. *The Language of Comic Narratives: Humor Construction in Short Stories*. New York.1968.
-