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The Comic Vision in Anurag Mathur's *Inscrutable Americans*

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Abstract:

The connection between literature and life is vital and intimate. It creates the way to express their thoughts and ideas while the subject matter and treatment must be such as of general interest and the expression must be emotive that gives pleasure and satisfaction to the readers. Humour and satire are the distinct elements of literature and are considered staple of it. An old age adage adds to the concept that, "Laughter is the best medicine." Jorge Garcia (1972) quotes that, "Mixing humour and harsh reality is a very human behaviour, it's the way people stay sane in their daily lives." They are the key ingredients of life or a good read. Without humour literature is tasteless curry with no spice. People of all ages and cultures respond to it. A few writers in the galaxy of Indian writings are there, who have left their footprints in this way to create a light moments for the burdened hearts. One such bright example is Anurag Mathur's *Inscrutable Americans*. It's a fantastic account of a small town boy caught in the fascinating, incomprehensible, inexplicable flurry of the great United States of America where sex, alcoholism and women are very common. The present paper aims to explore the humorous elements with pun intended in many situations.

Keywords: Humour, satire, fiction, culture, inscrutable, smile, mystery.

Introduction

Humour takes a prominent rank down the ages in the history of English literature. It's a phenomenon which is exhibited in different cultures and ages. Starting from the times of Chaucer to the present, the element of humour is quite remarkable. J.N. Mundra in *A History of English Literature Vol-I*, rightly observes on the comic elements in Chaucer as, "Chaucer was born humorist" (65). As a greatest myriad minded personality and an ever popular dramatist, William Shakespeare's works are extraordinarily outstanding and noteworthy for the use of humour and satire. Hence humour as a literary genre takes its foot prints from very beginning of historical point of view. The history of Indian English novel may be incomplete without the contribution of Anurag Mathur. He was born in New Delhi and educated at Sindia School (Gwalior), St Stephens College (Delhi) and University of Tulsa (Oklahoma). Mathur has spent three years in USA and has been successful in creating a number of literary

masterpieces. The world of Mathur's literary works include; *Inscrutable Americans*(1991),*Making the Minister Smile*(1996),*The Departments of the Denials*(1998) and *The Country is Going to the Dogs*(2014), etc. which have impacted the readers with its hilarious elements with use of satire. Mathur's *Inscrutable Americans* is an all-time best seller since its debut in 1991 and for the long eleven years notwithstanding media excitement and success stories surrounding other books.

Discussion

Humour is the genre that if executed well brings a sense of relief even to the tired minds. It's a phenomenon in literature which is exhibited in different cultures and ages. Mathur's present novel is a charming and hilarious story about Gopal, a simple chap is the heart of the story. In *Post Modern Indian English Fiction*(2012), Pattnaik gives an assessment on the funny elements of this novel and observes;

The *Inscrutable Americans* is the story of rustic Indian's encounter with a highly liberal and care free social milieu that is totally different from the traditional Indian life of restraint and moral prescriptions. It's the full funny episodes that emerge from the protagonist's adventures and misadventures in the land of Coca Cola, neon lights and sensual advertisements (51).

As a young man from the small town of India, Jajau and a son of a hair oil business person in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India arrives in America to study chemical engineering in a university in Eversville for his graduation that forms the crux of the story. It is a comical take on the lives of Americans. While Gopal reaches New York, he, Sunil and Sushant receive him and Gopal's comic discovery of America initiates. The author contrasts the cultural differences with references based on humour and satire. Gopal comes to America with pre-conceived notion and his English is hilarious. Ignorance, innocence and point blank honesty of the protagonist are attractive and at the same time the readers are taken aback by how minute details from day to day life of Americans amaze him. Gopal's reactions to the climate, the people, malls etc. have been described through the words of the mouth. Gopal's take on sex and the ways of Americans in general are amusing and entertaining. The protagonist is seen as a person who is torn between his urges and the values inculcated in him by his parents. The author has clearly brought out the differences between the two cultures via humour and simplicity. Gopal has all sorts of "illusions about Americans and this puts him through a series of comical situations" (Pattnaik 50).

Despite all the Dos and Don'ts that his family imposes upon him, Gopal is tempted by the culture there and tries to get under the guidance of Randy who takes pledge to make him experience all the pleasures of American living. The letters Gopal writes back to his younger brothers in India takes the readers to a laughter ride. The book is all about a young Indian's dream of what Americans are like with a university student level twist on global geo-

politics. There he battles the usual issues faced by an Indian living like racism, sexual discomforts, and food etc.

The novel starts with the letter from Gopal to his younger brother describing his experiences in the American heart land. His hometown Jajau is known as the 'Paris of Madhya Pradesh' but has not been exposed much to the rest developed parts of the world. Barely having any contact with girls, much less intimate with one. The story is told through his eyes, his thoughts and views of life. In his very first letter the readers start laughing at his English and its structure of sentences. The letter is written in Indian English being extremely humorous and entertaining.

Beloved Younger Brother, Greetings to Respectful parents "I am hoping all is well with health and wealth. I am fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too. With God's grace and parent's Blessings I am arriving safely in America and finding good apartment near university..." (01). In the globalized world Gopal lags behind to others and has doubts on the cooks and their caste that whether they are Brahmins or not. "I am strictly consuming vegetarian only in the restaurants though I am not knowing if the cooks are Brahmins" (01).

A good sense of humour runs through the readers when Gopal, the protagonist is bewildered out of his simplicity and his incorrect English. He gets surprised about the people of America. "I am not knowing where to start. Most surprising thing about America is that it is full of Americans, Americans big and white..." (01). Another hilarious situation comes through Gopal's obnoxious notion on English understanding ability of the air-hostess. Gopal thinks himself superior to them which is contrary to the reality. "I think perhaps she is not understanding proper English." (10). Mathur's description of the New York City will flash right in front of the reader's eyes. Through this letter Mathur again attempted to create light moments when Gopal is excited over the lights in New York. He feels that as if God has created a carpet of lights over the town. At the time of landing from the aero plane the air-hostess offered him a can of coca-cola with a smile. But the innocent chap doesn't understand it. This short glance of behavior with smile changes his previous notion of Americans. "I think they are knowing everything about everybody who is coming to America" (11).

Simplicity through the protagonists prevails most of time and creates laughter. Gopal's first friendship with Joe, a negro gentle man makes him feel very close to him and infers him to be treated properly by his parents, if he comes to Jajau. Gopal faces an immigration officer when he conceives as the American having information of the visitors before and instructs his brother to lock all doors and windows. Interestingly he conceives them as CIA agents having information even about their donkey.

"But brother, now I am worrying. Supposing this is CIA keeping watch or else how they can know about our donkey?" (12). Once again simplicity and honesty prevails in the character of Gopal who doesn't want to cheat his motherland. American beauty has impressed

him and Gopal looks desperately a beautiful lady on the way with Sushant and Sunil. Gopal was unable to understand the mystery of the basket that was hung in front of every houses and thought it to be connected with the religion but resolves not to ask anybody apprehending to be proved as silly and foolish.

While on the way to airport Gopal's bewilderment starts with right from the mysterious American girls, new gadgets, the naked billboards, vegetarian cats and continues with the telephone and colour TV with various channels, first time in his life. Gopal comes to know Randy who welcomes him at the airport and introduces him to the American society and culture. Randy helps him to his destination Gopal feels sleepy and at the same time thinks about his homeland. The novelist here tries to present another hilarious situation as Gopal is concerned about the name Randy and compares to Randy's meaning in India and feels that he got a friend at last but to him only girls are Randy but maybe he is one of those boy types. "He said he is Randy. I know from penthouse letters about that, but there are only girls are Randy. May be he is one of those boys types. I must be careful". Next morning Gopal is sleepily awake, looks around through gummy eyes and struggled up wondering where he was. He is worried about what lay ahead and compares most of Americans as monsters. "Monsters with American faces materialized in front of him waiting to perform unimaginable cruelties."

Another comic reference comes out from the friendship of Randy and Gopal. Once Randy gives a comment to a passing girl, 'Mary Lou. Gopal asked about the girl. Randy lightly compares her to the Linda Lovelace of the campus. Interestingly Gopal remarks him as the Harry Reems. By the way they reached at the Administration building. A short and a red haired man, Dean Smith infers him to be Gopal. When he asks him his name and said that Randy must be looking after. When he asked that about the discussion at that very moment Gopal immediately mentioned the name of Linda Lovelace. With beautiful skill of humour, Mathur has tried to create light moments for the readers. "You must be Gopal' 'I am Dean Smith. I hope Randy's been looking after you. What was he telling you about just now?' 'Linda Lovelace Sir'(37). Randy gurgled. Dean Smith gave him an old fashioned look as they went up the stairs.

Smith was bit caring to Gopal and instructs Randy to show Gopal library, bookstore, help him to meet teachers and show him the classrooms. Being a simple chap Gopal conceives him as very friendly. But contrary to his notion Randy makes him cautious about the future possibility of getting low grades. A sense of difference makes the situation hilarious. On the other hand Randy asks him to wait for the result and says that he is different as to his appearance. "He is friendly" Gopal told Randy as they went down the staircase. 'Yeah but not always. Wait till you get bad grades once you would think you would murdered his mother, the way he carries on.'(39) Gopal is bewildered over the sharing of same bathrooms both by boys and girls. Again he is obsessed with white beauty and feels the difference between the west and east. He is stunned over the AMERICAN mall and huge doubled storied building. Gopal's repeated letter to his brother is full of entertaining and hilarious. The language he

uses is very attractive and eye catching. He describes his new experience there about America and her people. “Beloved youngest one, how much I am missing one and all I simply cannot say. My head is eating circles. (54) Gopal writes about the lack of Brahmins in America. He also writes that America is full of divorcees and assures his brother avoiding them. Again he noticed a girl greeting him. But baffled and confused Gopal is bit reluctant to greet him same way. Rather he was not expecting such greeting from any girl. His explanation about him is humorous. The novelist tries utmost care to ease and relax the reader’s minds. “Hi,” said the startled voice. “Gopal was equally shocked, but recovered on seeing the girl with the kind face .He dug his hands into his overcoat and beamed awkwardly at her.’ ‘I am friend of Randy,” he explained in a rush in case she was planning to throw him out. (69)Gopal gets a chance to dance with a girl Ann but finds uneasy to match with others. In spite of his lose interest in it he gets closer to the girl and thinks to describe his friends in India about the closeness with beautiful girl.

Gopal could scarcely believe it. What a good time he was having. What a story to tell his friends when he got home.....And he would tell them about this lovely girl....and how she had grabbed the leg –he would show them the spot, a pity he could brand her fingerprints as a proof then taken him by the hand and dragged him into a dark room to dance (75).

Gopal’s next letter is about his aloofness towards the American way of life and asks his brother not tell about every odd there lest she would bother. Gopal is surprised to see washing machine there. “Also brother, you are not telling mother, but they are machines here that are cleaning clothes and drying in jiffy. I am knowing about all things and handling with mastery. My clothes are washing whitest and finger licking good.”(77) Contrary to his writing Gopal is exposed to the American way of life. As we move into the rising course of events we see Gopal’s priorities and thought process changes as he exposed more and more. “I am asks for going to classes, library and home ‘but he goes with Randy to real bar and cigarette.

Mathur again presents a comic situation in portraying the simplicity in Gopal. He writes letter to his brother that he is going to buy TV from Safeway. He mentions that they are known earlier and just like his friends and can ask discount. He questions that how can they be his friends if they are not giving discount? “Any way what to do but at least my new TV is coming yesterday, which I am buying from Safeway. I wish I am knowing earlier that they are my friends right down the street so that I can ask for discount otherwise how they are my friends?”(78) In course of events Gopal comes in contact with beautiful ladies at the bar. When she asks about her dance and asks to buy some drink honey his head moves vigorously. He thinks that he is ready to buy the empire state building if she asks for. “Oh yes Gopal’s head moved vigorously. As a matter of fact he was going to buy her the empire state building if she asked for it.”(94)

All the letters to his brother, Gopal complains about the language and his helplessness to comprehend it is really comic one resulting in discomfoting situations. "Any way I am learning many important things about Americans. Biggest thing is language. It is earlier making many problems for me, because like everyone I am thinking Americans are speaking English, it is American. I am facing so many embarrassing on this reason." (189). Mathur satirizes at the American student's lack of interest in utilizing the opportunity available there through beautiful characterization of Gopal. In another occasion Gopal meets Sue while returning from library. He is highly impressed by the emotion shown by her, but his heart breaks when he discovers Sue with another man. Disappointed Gopal now spends time by drinking and vomiting. Gopal again discovers the white supremacy over the blacks as he comes to know the actual poverty among them.

Gopal has been subjected to the traditional method of education where everything had been drilled into his mind by the rote system of learning where questioning was considered heresy by the teachers. With perfect skill of satire the novelist tries to induce satire here. His thought process revolves round in America leading to blooming out and learning the art of logical thinking, deductive reasoning and most important of all encompassing thirst for knowledge. His respect for teachers was really high now seems old bigoted people. Through the character of Gopal the author ventures into the Indian psyche of malice and jealousy which are unnoticed in American society. There are several instances where Gopal's gentle innocence leads him to pretty hilarious conclusion. When he is asked to watch his ass "watch your ass" that leads Gopal quickly assumes that the man was referring to his two donkeys that his family had bought before his departure from India. The comic description is really heart touching. Gopal wonders how they know of the two donkeys and he believes that it is the part of the bigger conspiracy of the CIA collecting all the data that they can have idea about everyone coming to America. Again Gopal sees himself as a cultural ambassador and the way he sets his intention is quite amusing. He thinks that because of India's superior culture they must set an example so that the American must improve their behavior leading to bilateral relationship. Gopal's character has a rustic undertone while others are characterized by the American ways of thinking as far as food, women and dating are concerned. It is a story of comic satire on the stereotypes and prejudices of Indian migrants in their adopted land. Gopal interacts with Tom. Gopal says all are same and stresses that Indians are like this. Tom is surprised "Yes. Yes everywhere people are same. I am having uncle who is so proud of India and culture that he is thinking all are inferior." "India has a culture?" Here Mathur satirizes the American insularity and ignorance of other culture. His day to day activities in the alien culture and social surrounding seems ludicrous. He is faced with pretty issues, encounters some shocking people and his bewilderment towards the diverse culture. Again the funny Indian references make it more attractive. In spite of criticism the novel grasps its position well. It may not be for hard-core literature lovers but it is good for the persons who have penchant for comedy.

At last his one year of staying in America comes to an end and Gopal leaves from the campus taking with him reminiscences of strange America. The peak of the novel reaches when Gopal comes in contact with a lady in the plane, starts discussion with on his adventures with women in a diverse and powerful country in America. He also mentions his uninteresting future in India and an anonymous wife and feels immersed by her and they suddenly become intimate with each other and start kissing while talking. At last his desire comes to be true and is fulfilled. Gopal is satisfied with his kiss at least above the ocean and feels to be a complete man.

Conclusion

After all it's a cute, charming, hilarious and poignant novel that heels the burdened minds of the readers. It's a sensitive portrayal of the tribulations of the first time in America from India and how he tries to retain his self-esteem and identity there. The letters written by the protagonist is full of laughter which adds smiles to a great number of faces. Gopal the village boy's innocence has been portrayed quite convincingly and his obsession with Jajau's Hair Oil Factory is much funny and comic. The author captures the immigrant experiences of culture clash in a different way that attract huge number of students. This novel brings out the striking features of the diverse cultures with doses of laughter. His attempts to understand the American culture with the help of his mentor is quite amusing and funny. The comic vision in the novel is well articulated. It's quite funny and worth reading. It brings a sense of relief to the readers. Comic relief, the chief ingredient of a good read is presented through the novelist's beautiful skill. The author manages to maintain the flow of the story admirably. The book is pleasure to read. A pinch of communism and racism add flavour to the comic elements making it cuter, sweet and light to read and is a non-stop ride in hilarity.

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