



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## PRESENTATION OF BLACK HUMOUR IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH 22*

**MOLLA HAFIZUR RAHAMAN (W.B.E.S.)**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mangalkote Govt. College, Khudrun, Mangalkote,  
Burdwan, West Bengal, India.



**MOLLA HAFIZUR RAHAMAN**

### ABSTRACT

Black humour has almost nothing to do with the medieval physico-pathological theory of humour propagated by Gelen. Black humour is a literary technique that makes man to laugh in a horrible situation so that we do not cry. It is a humour discovered in agony, despair and horror. Many renowned novelists have used this safe device of black humour to ventilate the actual grim picture of World Wars affected America. My aim in this paper is to show Joseph Heller has used black humour in his widely-read famous fiction *Catch 22*.

**Key Words:** black humour, literary technique, despair and horror, world war.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The medieval physico-pathological theory of humour(Latin, liquid),as propagated by Gelen, enunciates the existence of four kinds of humour— blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile),and melancholy(black bile).The theory postulates that the human body is an amalgam of these four humours, which correspond, in fact , to the four basic elements - earth ,air, fire, and water- of external nature. A man's temperament,his state of body or mind is determined by their propotion in his body. An imbalance of one or another humour in a body is said to produce four kinds of disposition, whose names have survived the underlying theory: Sanguine(from Latin "Sanguis" , blood), phlegmatic, choler, and melancholic. The excess of a particular humour destroys the balance of mind. The ultimate effect is to drive him to a state of eccentricity and frenzy, to cause some sort of abnormalcy in his nature and behaviour.

However, humour has ,in our times, almost nothing to do with its early Medieval Western physico-pathological theory. Now humour can be simply defined as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit a laughter reflex. At present its only function

seems to be to provide relief from tension. This is exactly where the literary artists have exploited it artistically. Humour is the only form of communication in which a stimulus on high levels of complexity produces a stereotyped, predictable response on the psychological reflex level. The purpose of humour is just to evoke sympathetic laughter or just laughter that ends in itself.

The mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century has been a pivotal pain in the people's lives of America, wherein many revolutionary incidents happened that radically reversed the values, beliefs, and ideologies of human society as the society gradually moved towards modernization .American society , in particular, has been so directly affected and influenced by the consequences of the Cold War that they began to believe that it was not bad to be selfish. Life became so insignificant and meaningless that people thought that to think about one's welfare and survival was not objectionable. American Govt. was unable to provide justification of Cold War. So American people have become more skeptical about the honour, nationalism, patriotism, and heroism that are supposedly the

byproduct of sacrifice and selflessness of the noble men for the sake of the country. People's disillusionment led to the development of black humour in American culture. Black humour became the American people's way to express the feelings of disillusionment and hopelessness. In Jean Jenet's *The Maids*(1954) and *The Blacks* (1958), Harold Printer's *The Home Coming* (1965) and Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Stoane*(1965 ) sinister and ominous subjects are depicted with a kind of bitter amusement. Authors like Kurl Vonnegut, Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco and even Gunter Grass present horrible, brutal, and absurd subjects in their works utilizing black humour which juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones and underscores the senselessness or futility of life. Black humour often uses farce or low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character. Though in 1940 the French surrealist Andre` Breton published *Anthology of Black Humour* the term did not come into common use until 1960. Then it was applied to the works of the novelists like Nathanael West, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Heller.

Joseph Heller's *Catch22* is no doubt an anti-war novel because it has a disparaging view of war. Here Heller does not directly express his anti-war attitude. He very masterfully designs an impressive satirical style to expose the ugly face and facts of war. His skilful handling of narration , dialogue, and characterization create a unique perspective of war and the bureaucracy of American society. The satire, sarcasm, irony and general absurdity of the novel provide a view of the irrationality of man's behavior. The horror that is portrayed in *Catch22* is intensified by the humourous way in which it is portrayed. Laughing face of war and death, literally, is one of the things that make the novel *Catch22* such an intriguing and original story. The novel was written in 1961, a time when, due to the fighting of the Second World War ,all war novels were written with a dark and dreary tone ,while still trying to continue the pre- conceived romantic notions about war. However, Joseph Heller strips away all of the romantic pretence, and pulling heavily on his own Air Force experience during Second World War, presents war in *Catch22* in its most raw, un-

censored version employing black humour to make fun out of the horror of war. The novel also shows humourously how stupid some of the rules of the army are.

The chief-protagonist of Heller's *Catch22* , John Yossarian,an Air Force captain and B-256 bombardier in Second World War ,stationed in Pianosa, believes that war is madness, nothing but organized butchery of young boys. Yossarian is confused and puzzled that men sacrifice their valuable lives for vague concepts such as country, patriotism, and honour. He does not want to kill innocent human beings in the name of war .The dark side of meaningless war is clear to him,that is why he cleverly takes refuge in hospital feigning complicated illness. Yossarian expresses the horrible aspects of grim reality in a pleasant way with the help of black humour. In order to beautifully express how black humour operates, it is indispensable to determine the central idea behind the rule that is catch22: "All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were lying down their lives for what they have been told was their country ,and no one seemed to mind ,least of all the boys who were lying down their young lives.There were no end in sight. The only end in sight was Yossarian's own , and he might have remained in the hospital until doomsday had it not been for that patriotic Texan.....The Texan wanted every body in the ward to be happy but Yossarian and Dunbar. He was really very sick." The above mentioned extract from Heller's *Catch22* clearly brings out the underlying 'principal' behind catch22: "a rule which allows you no way out, when another rule apparently does allow you a way out". Thus *Catch22* is a rule that has two claims, which oppose each other. Black humour is clearly visible in the idea of the rule of catch22.Almost all the youngmen of Yossarian's army want to escape death by avoid the flying mission which mercilessly kill the humanity; so they fake insanity. Unfortunately, the rule of *Catch22* makes it impossible to avoid the flying mission. Thus Yossarian and his associates are controlled and regulated by the truly insane people who are in favour of merciless killing of the young fighters of the country. Here Heller tries to create a comic element from the deplorable state of Yossarian and his team.

That *Catch22* engages in broad comedy is readily apparent from its first chapter, indeed its very first sentence. None will fail to appreciate a passage (which occurs in the First chapter, The Texan) such as following: "The colonel dwelt in a vortex of specialists who were still specializing in trying to determine what was troubling him. They hurled lights in his eyes to see if he could see, rammed needles into nerves to hear if he could feel. There was a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma; there was a pathologist for his pathos, a cystologist for his cysts, and a bald and pedantic cystologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by a faulty anode in an I. B. M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby Dick* with him".

Black humour is also demonstrated when the young soldiers are depicted as being far from patriotic and brave. In this novel, Heller describes humourously the senselessness of war, particularly the act of enlisting young men in combat, individuals who have no idea about, nor belief, on the war, they were supposed to be fighting. In the the previously cited passage. Heller observes that "the only end in sight was Yossarian's own, he might have remained in the hospital until doomsday had it not been for that patriotic Texan". The loathing that Yossarian perceives contradicts with the 'idea feeling' soldier should feel when risking their lives in combat they fight. However, since Yossarian and his team were reluctant to continue fight, when they are forced, they only feel resentment towards the stupid rules and regulation run by the senseless military officials.

The inhuman and unsanitary treatment of the 'soldier in white', his identity, his appearance and disappearance in the novel remain a mystery for Yossarian. He receives such treatment simply because he is fed with his own bodily wastes. The hospital staffs take advantage of the fact that the soldier in white is incapable of moving around and they put him under the control and mercy of the doctors and nurses. "He had been smuggled into the ward during the night." "The soldier in white was

constructed entirely of gauze, plaster and a thermometer, and the thermometer was merely an adornment left balanced in the empty dark hole in the bandages over his mouth early each morning and late in each afternoon". He was fed so pathetically that it evokes an unbearable pain to the sensitive spectators. The treatment reserved for the injured, wounded, and maimed soldiers is really pathetic. The soldier in white, Yossarian thinks, is symbol of the senselessness of war. His pathetic situation realized Yossarian that it is more important to be self-centric and survive to sacrifice oneself for one's own country.

In *Catch22* black humour is not only used for the portrayal of people's disillusionment, hopelessness, and suffering, but also utilized for the presentation of the individual as being insignificant. Here Yossarian has been shown as a hopeless, insignificant man, though in reality he is a man of quality. According to David Cochran "individual in modern life has become insignificant". And this is perhaps the most comic issue that black humourist like Heller wants to focus on through the characters like Yossarian, Soldier in white, and the soldiers who pretend insanity just to escape their flying mission.

Black humour not only highlights the negative aspects of life but also serves as a technique which Heller uses to expose the unfair and unjust treatment of the soldiers engaged in combat during war. Through black humour, Heller humourously criticizes and exposes the military and the Government who encourage war for their own interest. So black humour may be regarded as a form of subversion; a rebellion that criticizes and exposes and at the same time wants to abolish the military propaganda and manner of handling conflicts. By abolishing military institution, society will be self-preserved where humanity will not merely think about its survival but also enjoy quality of life. Black humour attempts to bring back the importance of selflessness, courage, and patriotism among people who believed that it is not bad to be selfish.

#### REFERENCES:

- [1]. Heller, Joseph, *Catch22*, VINTAGE BOOKS, U.K. Random House.
- [2]. Cliff notes

- 
- [3]. Spark notes
  - [4]. Abrams, M. H. A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition.
  - [5]. Dutta, Kalyannath, A Constellation of Literary and Critical Terms.
  - [6]. David, Mrs Mary S, A History of American Literature.
  - [7]. Gray, Martin: A Dictionary of Literary Terms, Pearson
  - [8]. Shihan, I. H.: Literary and Critical Terms. M. V. Phase II, Delhi.
  - [9]. Heller, Joseph: Closing Time. SIMSON & SCHUSTER, NEW YORK.
-