



Humour in Manoj Das's *The Mystery of the Missing Cap*

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Abstract

From time since immemorial, literature has been the breeding bed of human civilization. Literature not only teaches but also amuses. Sometimes the naïve follies of the characters give rise to humour. Manoj Das is one of the notable short story writers of Odia as well as English literature. His short stories have a deep impact on the readers as it reflects the society we live in. Humour is the hallmark of his short stories. His short stories are full of humour that arrests the attention of the readers. The art of descriptiveness of the writer makes the reader visualize the story rather than they read them. The characters that are present in the short stories are very rooted to the ground of human psychology and we often find them around ourselves. They are rustic as well as naïve. They don't have the tendency to act foolish rather they are quite natural and full of simplicity.

Key Words- *Short Story, Humour, Comic*

Introduction

Literature is a discipline which is distinct from a common form of writing. It refers to a written work of art. As a body of work, Literature encompasses culture, language, people, place and period. This means Literature may represent a personal experience for the collective or the other way round. Literature, as an artistic, is also entertaining and creative. In the real sense, Literature attempts to situate or read man in all senses- his movement, his taste, his reasoning, his feeling, attitude or reaction, his intelligence and how he manifests it, his total being as a human being. That is why we often conclude that literature mirrors life or that it mirrors man himself so that he can acquire more knowledge and understanding about many things that his being is made up and that of his environment too.

A **short story** is a brief work of fictional prose, shorter than a novel, designed to be read in a single sitting and focusing on a limited scope, often a single incident, few characters, and a singular effect or mood. Story has been existing since the dawn of the human civilization. Different kinds of stories prevail: stories, tales, fables, parables, anecdotes and folk-tales in different languages in all countries. However, the short story differs from them. Only the common thing in them is story telling. Short story is a story first and then it is a short story. As a minor form of literature, a short story is a brief, and therefore easily apprehensible as completed work, usually entertaining, frequently intriguing in both form and content. Usually, a short story focuses on only one incident, has a single plot, a single setting, a limited number of characters, and covers a short period of time¹.

¹ Varghese, ED. (2013) Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English, London: Bloomsbury

Humour is a literary tool that makes audiences laugh, or that intends to induce amusement or laughter. Its purpose is to break the monotony, boredom, and tedium, and make the audience's nerves relax. Humour is part of comic writing. It's used to make the viewer of a play, the reader of a story, or any other literary work laugh. This is a pleasurable experience that makes them want to continue watching/reading the content. Sometimes, if a story gets too dark and too overwhelming, it might drive the reader away. This is why it's often a smart choice to include a comic character, even in one's most terrifying and foreboding stories. When humour is injected into a storyline, it can lighten the mood considerably and make the reading experience more fun.

There are eight major elements of humor in writing literature.

Self-deprecating: This is the best form of humor to target oneself to amuse people and create a cheerful environment.

Hyperbolic: It means to make something bigger or exaggerate any real or fake events than it actually is for the sake of entertainment.

Incongruity: It means to make something incongruous or silly through comments about something unsuitable.

Situational: It means to talk about the situations whether good or bad in a funny way. This is sometimes done to lessen the tension in a serious environment too.

Understatement: It means to belittle something for humor. It is the opposite of hyperbole and this type of humor lessens the importance and makes serious and bad things look like nothing.

Irony: It means to hide the actual meanings behind the language. It is usually used a lot in humor when serious or painful situations are spoken in an opposite sense with great emotion.

Satire: One of the most common senses of humor used to criticize someone like a political leader or any issues that are in the news/up-to-date and even using humor to expose their qualities.

Anecdotal: It means to create anecdotes to cause laughter or reveal an account. These anecdotes can be based on truth or fiction².

In this context Manoj Das's the *Mystery of the Missing Cap*³ is a hallmarked short story in the field of humour. This story depicts the plight of two people intrigued by a notorious monkey Jhandoo. As the title suggests, the cap of the minister plays a prominent role in the story. In fact it is the linchpin of the story. The story revolves around Sri Moharana who is one of the most renowned people of the village. He is the well to do person of the village having the only pukka-house which is not less than half a century old. The social position of Moharana reflects the then Land-Lordship of pre and post-independent Indian psychology.

The missing cap plays a pivotal role in giving a twist to the aspiration of Sri Moharana. A trivial thing like cap can become the center of the story and the sudden vanishing of it has given rise to turmoil. The cap belongs to the minister and the minister was the guest of Sri Moharana. In that light it is the moral duty of the Sri Moharana to safe guard the belongings of the minister. But no one has expected that the notorious monkey would cause an act of taking away the cap that happens to be the pride of the minister. The same cap that was later discovered being with the monkey created an unwanted situation for the guest and the host that put their political career on stake.

From the very beginning till end, the story is full of humour. The setting of the story is a village; in fact it is the writer's maternal uncle's village. The first hand experience of the writer gives an insight to the story telling aspect to the reader making it more humorous. In the beginning the writer appeals the readers to have sympathy on the two persons around whom the whole story revolves around; as they become the victims of the catastrophe. This very start strikes the keynote of the comic humour that the readers are going to enjoy. The only 'pukka house' of Moharana in the twenty villages has become a symbolic representation of his

² <https://literarydevices.net/humor/>

³ The Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories.

importance in that area that becomes ‘a sort of tourist attraction’ for many who passed it when it was white-washed on eve of the independence though it was half a century old.

In the remote villages of a state like Odisha, where people are not accustomed to the so called development, a pukka-house (concrete house) was a dream like them. They have not seen a minister and they think a minister is next to God. At that time ministers also enjoyed such luxurious life and the villagers of the story wrangled over many things of the minister. So the visit of the minister caused an alarming situation making all busy to avoid any unwanted situation as Moharana was going to debut his political career by the blessing of the minister.

In the context of India getting independence, apart from the four castes, another caste emerged throughout the country that is the caste of patriots. Moharana had ‘two ponds with full of choice fish’ and ‘a number of well cared cows’. Moharana too had become a patriot by becoming ‘an exemplary host’ as the fish and the dairy products of his were used for the patriots. Here writer justifies the cause of Moharana turning humanitarian as he had secretly nurtured the aspiration to become the MLA of that constituency. In this light we get a glimpse of how politicians manipulate the resources to fulfill their dreams. The innocent people are ignorant of such tricks.

Writer also describes the daily life of the ministers; largely made up of ‘speech making at public receptions’ and enjoying a life of luxury. The minister of our story, Babu Virkishore was the then minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts. His blessing was indispensable for Moharana to begin his political career. So, a reception committee was formed under the chairmanship of Moharana and all arrangements were made in that context.

A welcome song was prepared by the sixty-seven years old head pundit of the village primary school who had no relation with music or poetic activity. In the welcome song, the writer had mocked at the false appreciation of the ministers and how people try to appease by singing sweet-coated word in the praising of the ministers. The refrain of the song is still fresh in the mind and heart of the writer though the incident had occurred some decades ago-

“O mighty minister, tell us do tell us,
How do you nurse this long and broad Universe!”⁴

The other things that the song encompasses are- the changes that would occur in the nature that day like the sun would blush in romantic happiness, each and every bird recited a particular raga; the women of the village would blow conch-shells with throbbing heart when the minister stepped into the village. The rustic children were very curious about the minister’s arrival. It was a life-time experience for them. As we all know the village people are innocent and they are not like the so called developed civic society. For them the minister is something God-like figure with all power and majesties. They wrangled over minister’s food, sleep; whether he suffered colic and colds like them etc. These types of thoughts are really very humorous and give rise to social criticism.

The description of the minister’s arrival better triggers the nerve of humour in the readers as the writer very well knows how to erupt laughter taking situation into consideration. On the day of the minister’s arrival, when the elephantine minister plodded through the street, it embarrassed the poor naked earth. A comic humour erupts here as the minister do rarely visits the village after the election is over. It is like the bereaved wife when gets the gentle touch of her awaited husband after a long time when he returned from abroad. While walking parallel the minister rested his long round arm around Moharana’s neck, it made Sri Moharana so contented and complete that didn’t need anything more from his mortal life. Here we can find a tinge of humour as Moharana had an aspiration to become an MLA and this light to come into politics how people appease the minister and can go to any extend.

⁴ ibid

The arrangements made at Sri Moharana's house may not be so pompous but in a remote village like writers' that is exclusive. The description of minister's repose has been very comically described. When the minister was having a rest in the specially arranged cabin with volunteers posted to avoid any disturbance, 'the notorious irresponsible Jhandoo' bounced through the window facing towards the grove and took away the cap and vanished into the grove. Accidentally, the writer was present at the window facing towards the pond as he had a curiosity like others to see how minister sleeps. But he was disillusioned seeing the minister snoring like any ordinary man resting his egg-bald head on the gigantic pillow and keeping his cap on the table. This taking away of the cap was only known to the boy (writer) and none other. This created havoc in the house. The mixed reaction of the minister's P.A. and the Public Relation Officer added humour to the scene. The PRO's statement

"The Hon'ble Minister does not mind the loss of the cap so much as the way it disappeared. Evidently there is a deep-rooted conspiracy. The gravity of the situation can hardly be exaggerated. In fact, it may have devastating effects on the politics of our country."⁵

In this scene we can see an ample amount of humour as the power of the cap has been exaggerated portraying as one of the most important asset of the country. The writer's master craftsmanship reaches the apex when he successfully converts such trivial incident into an epic-comic scene erupting humour at best. One could see Moharana literary shaking. He was sweating like an ice cream that would melt away in few hours. When Moharana came to know from the writer, all about the missing cap-

"He smiled like a patient whose disease has been diagnosed all right, but is known to be incurable. xxx The incident had thrown a wet blanket on the occasion"⁶

The intermittent coughing of the minister damped anxiety in the spirit of the people in the courtyard and on the veranda. At the same time, the naïve friends of the writer had different discussion like

"If the thief were caught, the police would hang him on the big banyan tree beside the river. Some twigs have already been cut off. xxx Perhaps all the villagers will be thrown into jail. xxx The minister's cap was a sort of Aladdin's lamp, that anyone who put it on would possess ministerial power."⁷

When village people talk, it seems the simplicity talks in them. They are not as intelligent as the people of the town and that brings humour to the story when they consider the minister's cap as something big enough worth stealing.

A moment later minister was seen with all smiles accompanied with Moharana and denied to wear a cap with a genial gesture and to keep his head bare that evening that moreover looked like a satellite emitting "an aura of martyrdom." Here the writer had vented a comic relief to the intense situation by a positive change in the minister from annoyance to all smiles. Moharana has very well handled the situation and took the advantage of the situation to take the minister to his side.

In the stage scene, we find a very heart touching humour, when

"Sri Moharana's niece, the lone high-school-educated girl of the area garlanded the minister. A prolonged thunderous applause greeted the event; for that was the first time our people saw what they had only heard in the tales of the ancient Swayamvaras, a grown-up girl garlanding a man in public."⁸

Here once again the writer has succeeded in inducing humour in the context of the rustic situation where people had not accustomed to such unusual situation that they might have read in some Puranas or in epics, but that day they witnessed by themselves. Then the welcome song that was sang with much precision, turned into the Kirtan style.

On that stage, Sri Moharana gave his debut speech. So, his hands and legs moved in very awkward fashion adding humour to the situation. Moharana's praising of the minister's parents added humour to the situation as without them the world would have been without the minister. Then he disclosed the mystery of the missing cap which was the most awaited moment for the people of the village as they were eagerly waiting for as

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

“a certain nobleman of our area has taken it away. Why? Well to preserve it as a sacred memento. He was obliged to take it away secretly because otherwise the Hon’ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts, who is burning example of humility, would never have permitted our friend the noble man to view the cap as anything sacred!”⁹

Influential people seldom say lie and Moharana as a well-known person didn’t have to tell lie in his life. For the first time he had to tell lie, that to save the dignity of the village, and had to tell before five thousand people. He also presented a handkerchief full of one hundred coins as the so called nobleman had gifted to the minister in lieu of the cap. Moharana had to spend that amount to save the situation. That evening the minister kept his head bare as a tribute to the noble thief and in middle of every discussion; he would take the pain to praise the nobleman.

At the time of the minister’s departure when he was given a glass of sweetened curd, his throat choked with curd and emotion how people loved him, and he even didn’t mind giving away everything as a symbol of love. But soon this bubble ruptured when Jhandoo reached the placed with the cap on his head. Moharana could not tell a lie to the minister’s question whether that was the noble man, living both in a desperate situation. It is often said that when comic or humour is prolonged, it can cause a tragic situation. Similar situation occurred in the case of the Minister. The minister who wished to get robbed for people’s love suffered disillusionment after the disclosure of the truth.

In this way the story encompasses many humorous situations that are not intentional rather erupted from the simplicity of the situation. The notorious monkey’s foolish act caused a catastrophic effect on the political career of Moharana as well as the Minister; Babu Virkishore vanished from the politics of Odisha.

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