Elements of Humour in Chetan Bhagat's Novels

Aishvarya Partap[1], Prof. (Dr.) N. Padmasree[2]
[1]Research Scholar, [2]Dept. of English
Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

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ABSTRACT

The element of humour is predominant in all the novels of Chetan Bhagat. His novels have humour as an undercurrent and it is 'black humour' that is predominant in his novels. Black Humour is a form of humour that regards suffering as absurd rather than pitiable, or that considers human existence as ironic and pointless but somehow comic. It is also called a black comedy, and it often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character. Chetan Bhagat has used humour to bring out the realistic picture of contemporary society. Humour is known to flourish the best in one's native language. Though, the novelist writes in English, he makes the language much at ease in it as one would in one's own native tongue.

INTRODUCTION

Humour means something that is or is designed to be amusing. Good definitions and valid generalizations about humour are hard to come by. What really amuses us? Who finds what funny? How can literary fiction be enhanced? Humour arouses interest in the story, sustains attention, helps reader connect with characters, helps emphasize and relate ideas, helps create images in reader's mind, makes story more memorable, and above all makes the reader feel good. In fact, in some ways, the entire existence is seeking change for the better to feel good. Man works to make money to essentially feel better. He plays sports to feel better about himself. He goes to movies, reads books, and eats chocolate– to feel better. The humour is a feeling, that gives man pleasure, and he constantly seeks humour for pleasure. The important thing about all forms of humour is that they make the readers feel good.

Humour depends either on a change in perception or differences when one thing is compared to another. Changes and differences are the stimuli that cause the humourous response. A response can be a laugh, a chuckle, amusement, or simply a change in the way the person thinks about things. A guy walks into a bar and sits down next to a lady and a dog. The man asks, "Does your dog bite?" The lady answers, "Never!" The man reaches out to pet the dog, and the dog bites his hand. The man says, "I thought you said your dog doesn't bite!" The woman replies, "He doesn't. That's not my dog." It is obvious that humour relates to background, social perceptions, geographical location, culture, maturity, and level of education. And human beings use humour to connect with each other. Humour is something that pleases the reader. There is always something new. Humour continuously changes as life progresses, and although any serious dissection of humour for better comprehension is immediately outdated, new humourous elements constantly increase resources for a writer.

The dominating tones in Chetan Bhagat's debut novel *Five Point Someone: What not to do at IIT!* (2004) is of light humour. On the very first day, all the three IITians, Hari Kumar, Alok Gupta and Ryan Oberoi, are called by their seniors for ragging. Chetan Bhagat gives the description of two seniors Anurag and Baku in a quite humourous way:

A senior named Anurag leaned against a wall. Another senior, to my nervous eye, looked like a demon from cheap mythological TV shows – six feet tall, over a hundred kilos, dark, hairy, and huge teeth that were ten years late meeting an orthodontist…Baku, a lungi-clad human toothpick, and just as smelly is my guess. (Bhagat 2)

The three fresher are forced to remove their clothes by their seniors. The entire description gives a feeling of humour. The narrator says, "Look at them, mothers fed them until they are ready to explode, little Farex babies," Baku cackled" (Bhagat 4). The description of Professor Dubey is another example of the novelist's humourous sense. He narrates, "He appears around forty years of age, with gray hair incandescent from three tablespoons of coconut oil, wore an un-tucked light blue shirt and had positioned three pens in his front pocket, along with chalks, like an array of bullets" (Bhagat 7). Professor Dubey takes out a chalk from his pocket "with a flourish celluloid-terrorists reserved for hand-grenades and underlined the word 'machine' six times" (Bhagat 8). On the question of Professor Dubey, Hari's tongue "cleaves unto dental roof, body freezes, blood vessels rupture and sweat bursts out in buckets" (Bhagat 9). The description of the narrator regarding other IITians is also humourous:

> I also got familiar with Kumaon and other wing-mates. I won't go into all of them, but in one corner there was Sukhwinder or the 'Happy Surd' since his face broke into sunny smiles at proximity with anything remotely human. Next to him was the studious Venkat, who coated his windows with thick black paper and stayed locked inside alone. There was 'Itchy' Rajesh whose hands were always scratching some part of his body, sometimes in objectionable place. On the other side of the hallway were seniors' rooms, including Baku, Anurag and other animals. (Bhagat 13)

Ryan's mocking "Yes sir, let us mug and cram. Otherwise, how will we become great engineers of this great country" (Bhagat 18) though not quite humourous but somehow gives a smile. Hari's first meeting with Neha Cherian, the daughter of Professor Cherian also makes the reader laugh in some way. Hari collides with a red Maruti car when he is on his morning walk in order to reduce his weight and fat. Neha promises Hari a treat. Hari's reaction "free food is always welcome. Keep bumping me" (Bhagat 30) leaves the smile on reader's face.

Alok's father is to be taken to hospital as he is not feeling well. All the three friends approach Alok's home. Hari sees Alok's house for the very first time. He is poor but "not World Bank ads type starving poor or anything" (Bhagat 33). His mother's voice is so pathetic that "would make even Hitler cry" (Bhagat 33). Alok does not perform well in the next Physics quiz. He requests the professor for a re-quiz, who in response "stared back as if he had been asked for both his kidneys" (Bhagat 34). In their viva-voce examination and group discussion, Hari is asked a trick question by Prof. Goyal. But he fails to answer the question even after mugging it so many times. Prof. Goyal's remarks "The standard of this institute is going down day by day. What are you, commerce students?" (Bhagat 56) creates humour. When the results of their majors are out, they react "as if India had won the World Cup or nude women were rolling on the grass outside" (Bhagat 60). Hari, Ryan and Alok get 5.46, 5.01, and 5.88 GPA respectively. Ryan congratulates Alok, "You have topped amongst us"

(Bhagat 61). Hari meets Neha at ice-cream Parlour. With Neha's touch he "melted faster than the ice-cream; like the bad mood bugs running through me suddenly got Baygon-sprayed" (Bhagat 68).

To challenge the IIT system, Ryan discovers 'Cooperate to Dominate' (C2D) plan. This plan also highlights the demerits of IIT system. He beautifully drafts the terms and conditions for the three friends. While Ryan is very serious and conscious about this C2D plan, but at the same time, the six points agenda is also quite humourous in description.

Professors are well-known for maintaining the highest academic standards in the IITs. Their appearances, their attitudes before the students set the tone of a good communication between them. Chetan Bhagat employs some harsh and unkind images of professors by mixing with humour. The novelist describes that "Prof Vohra was a portly man in his fifties, who had an unusually kind face for a Prof. Of course, nothing in his nature supported this. With six term papers a semester and a lethal red pen that crossed our one design submission after another, kind was hardly how you'd describe Prof Vohra" (Bhagat 117). Prof. Cherian walks and "brought with him a huge pile of books as if he had just robbed a library" (Bhagat 140). Hari remarks on the appearance of Prof. Cherian in a humourous way, "…Cherian had a bald spot bigger than a Nirula's hamburger. If she dressed to act in a horror movie, Neha would look like her father" (Bhagat 141). In the class, Prof. Cherian orders sealing the lips of all the students for sixty minutes in such a harsh tone "that would make Saddam Hussain shudder" (Bhagat 141) and "Chalk dust formed a cloud as if Cherian had burst a grenade in the classroom. Behind this, one could barely see his contorted face" (Bhagat 141). These images also show an undercurrent of IIT students' simmering anger and resentment against the professors' lack of consideration for the genuine problems of students.

Chetan Bhagat also exposes the poor food quality even in the messes of IITs in a humorous way. A big amount of money is charged for the name of facilities in the hostel and mess by the modern colleges. But after getting admissions in the college, the students feel themselves cheated. The mess of Kumaon hostel and the food served in this mess is also criticized in a humorous way. The light humour with an undercurrent of resentment is remarkable in the following description:

> Several weeks later, we were in the Kumaon mess eating dinner. It was Thursday I guess, for that is when Kumaon had 'continental' dinner. In reality, it was just an excuse for mess-workers to not give us real food. The menu sounded nice – noodles, French fries, toast and soup. It tasted awful. The cooks made the noodles in superglue or something – they stuck to each other as one composite mass in the huge serving pan. The French fries were cold and either extremely undercooked or burnt to taste like coal. The cream of mushroom soup could have been mistaken for muddy water, only it was warmer and saltier. (Bhagat 157)

Chetan Bhagat makes a comparison between two dissimilar objects i. e. serious and somewhat common which naturally cause some humour. The expressions like "Food is almost as good as girls" (Bhagat 43), "It is hard enough to say no to pretty girls or to ice-cream but when it's offered together, it is well-nigh impossible" (Bhagat 43), "Figuring out women is harder than topping a ManPro quiz" (Bhagat 45), "She had made it pretty safe for me, but I tell you, the first time you ask a girl for a date, it is like the hardest thing. Almost as stressful as vivas" (Bhagat 47), and "The two bricks of ice-cream he had bought were melting and creating a puddle on our table, but, the puddles in Cherian's mind were causing us more concern" (Bhagat 242) are quite humorous in description.

Chetan Bhagat's second novel *One Night @ Call Center* (2004) contains many humorous and witty remarks. While travelling from Kanpur to Delhi, a beautiful woman enters his compartment. The novelist is happy and excited when he sees this. His remarks "Yet, it never happened. In most cases I shared my compartment with talkative aunties, snoring men and wailing infants" (Bhagat 1) make the readers laugh. In the novel all the six employees approach their working place through a Qualis. Shyam is getting ready to board the Qualis. He is in hurry because the Qualis is about to arrive to pick him. In haste, he fumbles. The whole scene creates humour:

> There were noises in the living room. Some relatives were in town to attend a family wedding. My neighbor was getting married to his cousin…er sorry, I was too groggy to figure this out – no, my cousin was getting married to his neighbor. But I had to work, so I could not go to the wedding. It doesn't matter, all marriages are the same, more or less…
>
> The bathroom door was open. I saw five of my aunts scrambling to get a few square-inches of the wash-basin mirror. One aunt was cursing her daughter for leaving the matching bindis at home. Another aunt had lost the little screw of her gold earring and was flipping out.
>
> 'It is pure gold, where is it?' she screamed into my face. 'Has the maid stolen it?' Like the maid had nothing better to do than steal one tiny screw. Wouldn't she steal the whole set? I thought. (Bhagat 12-13-14)

Shyam's own descriptions about his life and profession and his boss Bakshi when he goes to him to complain regarding the disturbance in the lines, is quite humorous and full of wit. Priyanka gives her consent to a marriage proposal which is from an NRI, named Ganesh Gupta. She is very happy and excited. Esha asks Priyanka to show them the photo of that NRI. Shyam's comments on Ganesh's photo is also quite humorous. He describes, "…I saw it from a distance: he looked like a regular software geek, similar to the guy under our table, but with better clothes. He stood straight with his stomach pulled in – an old trick any guy with a paunch applies when he gets his picture clicked…" (Bhagat 56).

The novelist does not forget to make his readers keep smile on their faces even in the grim hours of life. At the end of the novel, when all the six employees are on short journey, the Qualis staggers down into the site of a high-rise construction project. Their cell phone doesn't work and they visualize their death. Even in this hour of seriousness, Shyam's and his co-workers' remarks create humour and make the situation light. Shyam says:

> I closed my eyes for a second. I visualized my death. My life could end, just like this in oblivion. I wondered when and how people would find us. Maybe laborers tomorrow or even after a couple of days.
>
> 'Six irresponsible agents found dead, alcohol in body' would be the headline…
>
> 'My main question is – if no one finds us even after we die. What happens then?' Vroom said. 'The vultures will find us. They always do. I saw it on Discovery Channel,' I said. (Bhagat 198-199)

The way, all the six employees of the call center deal with their boss, Mr. Bakshi after receiving the phone call from God, is quite humorous and witty. The expressions like "my day is make if someone describes my looks as 'slightly above average" (Bhagat 23), "Inderjeet's minion collected tea orders as per the various complicated rules laid out by the girls" (Bhagat 25), "Military Uncle stared as if in

a state of shock. I suspect he was never young, was just born straight forty years old" (Bhagat 26), "Sometimes counting seconds is a great way to kill time through a woman's tantrums" (Bhagat 31), "I looked at her tiny nose. I wondered how it allowed in enough oxygen" (Bhagat 39), "Get me the potato chips. No, get me the popcorn. Popcorn is lighter, right?' She looked at the waiter as if he was a nutritionist" (Bhagat 40), "He clicked his pen shut with a swagger, as proud as da Vinci finishing the Mona Lisa" (Bhagat 48), "Radhika and Esha got up to hug Priyanka as if India had won the World Cup or something" (Bhagat 54), "Nothing better than a call center job if the phones are not working" (Bhagat 58), "He is in freaking Microsoft. As good as they get. He is MSGroom 1.1 – deluxe edition" (Bhagat 61), "Esha squealed, like a two-year-old on a bouncy castle" (Bhagat 65), "Girls' handbags have enough to make a survival kit for Antarctic" (Bhagat 71), "So oily, he probably slipped off his pillow every night" (Bhagat 84), "The invisible female antennae were out and suggesting caution" (Bhagat 119), "Whoever starts crying first always has an advantage in an argument" (Bhagat 125), "her mother said in a tragic tone that could put any Bollywood hero's mother to shame" (Bhagat 125), "It was a heart attack served on a plate" (Bhagat 129), "I think hitting your boss is the ultimate Indian male fantasy" (Bhagat 163), "Her Calvin Klein perfume will keep her carcass fresh for days" (Bhagat 200), "She looked at me as if a seven-year-old had just announced his decision to climb Mt. Everest" (Bhagat 31) are quite humorous in description and make the readers keep smile on their face throughout the novel.

The novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), based on some real happenings, also contains humorous element. There are many examples of the novelist's wit and humour. Humour operates in the text from the appearance and utterance of a person to a situation. Omi brings two poly-packs of milk and gives one to Ishaan. When Ishaan asks Omi for the second one, he replies, "Give it to your stick insect…Have you seen his arms? They are thinner than the wicket" (Bhagat 74). Later when Ali asks his cricket coach, "Why do people run between the wickets to score runs?" (Bhagat 74) also creates humour. The whole episode of book purchasing by Govind and Vidya at the University Bookstore at Navrangpura is funny and creates laughter. The owner of the bookstore is familiar with Govind. The shopkeeper raises his eye-brow and asks Govind about the girl. Govind replies, "Student, I take tuitions" (Bhagat 85). He whispers to satisfy his curiosity lest the shopkeeper gives up his sleeping for the rest of his life. The whole episode of book purchasing is quite humorous.

Govind's statement "Girls talk in circles. Like an algebra problem, it takes a few steps to get them to the point" (Bhagat 89) also creates a sense of humour. Some examples of the novelist's wit are simply brilliant because they combine humour with wisdom. This is what the tutor, Govind says to his math student, Vidya, "Who you are, what do you want versus what people expect of you. And how to keep what you want without pissing off people too much. Life is an optimization problem, with tons of variables and constraints" (Bhagat 198). And statement like "Her hair smelt of a little bit of Dettol soap and well, her. Every girl has a wonderful smell right after a bath. I think they should bottle it and sell it" (Bhagat 181) has some sense of humour. The novelist can find humour even in a romantic situation:

> 'I think a mosquito kissed me,' she said and spit again, 'is it still there in my mouth?'
>
> She opened her mouth and brought it close. Her lips were eight millimetres apart from mine…
>
> We kissed again. The mosquitoes on our respective heads rejoined. (Bhagat 183-184)

The humour in *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) is mostly situational. The cultural difference between the two – Krish is a Punjabi from Delhi while Ananya is a Tamil Brahmin –

becomes the springboard for many humorous comments and funny situations. Humour and fun is always the novelist's priority. Chetan Bhagat uses humour to deal serious issues in light manner and to make his readers feel comfortable even in the nervous situation. The first meeting of Ananya with Krish's mother creates humour. He describes the situation, "Ananya extended her arm to shake my mother's hand. My mother looked shocked. While Ananya touching her feet would be too much. I felt Ananya should have stuck to a Namaste. Anything modern doesn't go down well with parents" (Bhagat 45). Earlier when his mother hears the word 'girlfriend', she is shocked and reacts in a typical way, "You have a girlfriend? *Girlfreind*?' she said as if I had contracted AIDS. 'A good friend,' I said to calm her down. 'Good friend? What, you have bad friends also?" (Bhagat 42) Chetan Bhagat's creation of gentle humour is remarkable. The following description of Ananya's parents and their meeting with Krish's mother shows the novelist's skill in creating humour,

> Ananya's parents arrived ten minutes later. Her father wore a crisp white shirt, like the ones in detergent ads. Ananya's mother walked behind in a glittery haze. Her magenta and gold Kanjeevaram sari could be noticed from any corner of the lawn. She looked as if she had fallen into a drum of golden paint. Behind her walked a fourteen-year-old boy with spectacles; a miniature version of the MBA men who would get a degree this evening. (Bhagat 45)

Krish's mother wants to select the girl for her son according to her own choice. She doesn't even talk to Ananya. Her mother gets shocked when she hears the talk of Ananya's family. The whole scene makes the reader burst into laughter:

> 'Safety pin illa something something,' her mother replied. Mother and daughter lapsed into Tamil… My mother heard them talk and her mouth fell open…
>
> My mother said it loud enough for Ananya's mother to hear. They exchanged cold glances that could be set to the backdrop of AK-47 bullets being fired. Surely, it would take a Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to make them get along…
>
> 'I am under control. These South Indian don't know how to control their daughters. From Hema Malini to Sridevi, all of them trying to catch Punjabi men.'… (Bhagat 45, 47-48)

In Krish's meeting with Dolly and Pammi aunty, Chetan Bhagat creates humour to expose the hollowness of traditional concept of femininity and the image of new woman. Chetan Bhagat also gives the humorous picture how the Punjabis serve their guest and how they give preference to heavy food. He describes, "Raju and another servant brought in a gigantic tray with smosas, jalebis, cholebhature, milk cake, kachoris and, of course, the red and green chutneys. Twenty thousand calories were plonked on the table" (Bhagat 63).

With ironical humour, the novelist points out that "She screamed at the servant to scream at the driver to scream at the security guard to open the gate so the Honda could be taken out" (Bhagat 64). When Krish shifts to Chennai to seek his job and to meet Ananya as well, what he notices there, gives the sense of humour, "The first thing I noticed… Of these ninety percent, eighty percent had dabbed talcum that gave them a grey skin tone. I understood why Fair & Lovely was invented. I couldn't understand why people wanted to be fair so bad" (Bhagat 76). In such description, there is humour mixed with the gentle irony of the life-style of Tamilian. Krish's encounter with a 'Sardar-ji' in Chennai also gives the reader a sense of humour. Krish is surprised to find a 'Sardar-ji' speaking in Tamil fluently, "It is fascinating to see a Sardar-ji speak in Tamil. Like Sun TV's merger with Alpha TV" (Bhagat 79).

Humour is at its best when Krish's *Baraat* reaches Chennai. The Punjabis are totally at sea in the Tamilian ambience where they are supposed to go. This is what exactly happens:

> 'What is the address?' Rajji mama said.
>
> I took out the piece of paper Ananya's dad had given me…
>
> *Arulmigu Kapaleeswarar Karpagambal Thirumana Mandapam 16, Venkatesa Agraharam Street, Mylapore, Chennai*
>
> After three attempts at reading it, I had a headache. I counted the letters, my wedding venue had fifty alphabets in it. Delhi never gets this complicated. One of my older cousins had her wedding in Batra Banquets, another one in Bawa Hall. (Bhagat 251)

In *Revolution 2020: Love, Corruption, Ambition* (2011) also Chetan Bhagat has very successfully presented fun, humour, wit and irony. Even on the grim occasion of the funeral ceremony of Gopal's Baba, the novelist creates humour to make the situations light and to expose the reality. Gopal states:

> Hindus believe that if they die here, there is an automatic upgrade to heaven, no matter what the sin committed on earth. It is amazing how god provides this wild-card entry at death, which in turn allows my city to earn a living.
>
> Specialist one-stop shops provide you everything from firewood to priests and urns to ensure that the dead person departs with dignity. Touts on Manikarnika Ghat lure foreigners to come watch the funeral pyres and take pictures for a fee, thereby creating an additional source of revenue. Varanasi is probably the only city on earth where Death is a tourist attraction. (Bhagat 109).

CONCLUSION

Chetan Bhagat is successful in creating humour in almost all his novels. Humour prevails in his fiction writings. He does not let his readers get bored while reading his novels. He represents the striving, failures and frustrations of the young generation with a lot of social comments through the medium of comedy. The novelist is successful in conveying his serious social messages in a light humorous way. By portraying humour and wit in his novels, he not only entertains his readers but conveys a message to the young Indian contemporary society that even the toughest situation can be handled by keeping smile on the faces.

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