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SMILES BETWEEN STORMS: EXPLORING COMEDY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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Abstract
Literature and life are inextricably intertwined. Every human being, without exception, must pass through the vicissitudes of life. Rise and fall are inescapable, inevitable and integral aspects of human existence. Similarly, intellect and emotion coexist in every individual, though in varying degrees. A proverbial notion about comedy and tragedy, as Horace Walpole aptly puts it, is that life "is a comedy for those who think, but a tragedy for those who feel" (qtd. in Durant 450), highlighting the dominant influence of either reason or emotion. From time immemorial, through the various critical theories and the diverse practices of the two genres the world over, the fact is borne out that comic elements in tragedy function in two distinct modes. First, through guest appearances, they intensify the harrowing atmosphere and thus amplify the tragic impact. Second, through recurring intervals, they render the tragic condition more bearable. There is an inherent psychological tendency in the human mind to detach from a traumatic present. One of the finest literary examples of this defence mechanism appears in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Hester Prynne, the protagonist, stands on the scaffold with the letter "A" hanging from her neck, subtly recalling the albatross around the Ancient Mariner's neck. Surrounded by unsympathetic, judgmental and pitiless eyes, her mind involuntarily detaches from the present scene in Puritan New England and wanders back to her childhood in Old England. Without this sudden mental transposition, psychological breakdown or clinical madness might have been imminent. Hence, it is proposed to undertake in this paper to apply these general theories for a detailed comment on Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide, elaborating in the process the various kinds of humour and the very degrees of the aesthetic appreciation of the grim locale culminating in glimpsing of the moon-rainbow.

Keywords: Aesthetic Creation, Comedy, Comic Elements, Ghosh, Human Life, Humour, In-Built Human Tendency, Order— the Hallmark of Comedy, Tragedy.

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Human life itself is complex. It is invariably constituted of diverse elements. No single element or aspect can constitute an individual. Invariably, it is a compound, though the degree of constituent elements may vary from person to person. To take an illustration from a very different field—Metallurgy—no ornament can be made of pure gold. Some admixture of baser elements has to be infused to take away its brittleness and make it pliable to be moulded into an artistic design. Since all arts to a larger degree are a replica of life, the same principle of fusion operates therein as well. Hence, one can confidently aver that no artistic composition can be contained in water-tight man-made container—called by critics "genres". So, there are terms like poetic-prose, prosaic-poetry and tragi-comedy.

Similarly, in the realm of psychology, no two mental conditions can be shut away in different self-exclusive compartments. Also, nothing pure can retain its existence in ideal, isolated sphere for any length of conceivable time. Therefore, the perfect joyful condition of transcendental ecstasy or utter melancholic depression cannot last for much length of time. Hence, there can be no

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absolute affirmation of life or its utter denial. If a nihilistic view of art is given credence, it becomes a contradiction in terms. Its very fundamental premises are unsustainable. That is to say, if one believes that all existence is worth nothing, what is the rationale of aesthetic creation? Why should or would an artist create a work of art at all? If everything is pre-doomed and *nada* is the essential condition of man, no meaningful activity can bear fruits. Thus, one can with utter conviction affirm that the very action and purpose of artistic pursuit is a challenge to the forces of negation. The very fact that a work of art, from whatever sources, springs into life, is a self-evident proof for the dispelling of unmitigated gloom. The creation of art is an affirmation of life. By its very existence, it negates the forces of nihilism. No utterly dark or depressing view of life can be projected in a work of art. The very effort of creativity implies its obverse. The same idea informs Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* wherein he tries to express the view that even pessimistic writers, while they were describing the darkest view of life, their intention is invariably that its direct opposite will take shape in the mind of the reader (Garland 44-46). That is why expressions like "darkness is light enough" have gained currency in modern critical idiom.

Apparently, *The Hungry Tide* is a novel full of harrowing, tragic incidents. Beginning with factual details of killing by predatory animals, the whole region is infested by crocodiles, tigers, snakes, dolphins. Hence, in the beginning, all the houses were built on stilts. However, a closer reading reveals that this overwhelming gloom is interrupted—and even heightened—by the pervasive presence of comic elements. That is how in the chaos of this tragic domain some kind of structural order is infused. Somewhat similar is the point made by Schopenhauer when he opines that even a "genius is forced . . . sometimes into madness" (qtd. in Durant 437). It is conclusively affirmed by the age-old, universally accepted axiom that all philosophers are mad. Further, Schopenhauer remarks: "Madness comes as a way to avoid the memory of suffering" (qtd. in Durant 428).

Literature and life are inextricably intertwined. Without exception, each one of the human beings has to pass through the vicissitudes of life. Rise and fall are the inescapable, inevitable and integral parts of human existence. Similarly, intellect and emotions are co-existent in each and every self, though in varied degrees of proportion. One of the almost proverbial notions about comedy and tragedy is that "the world," as Horace Walpole puts it, " is a comedy for those who think, but a tragedy for those who feel" (qtd. in Durant 450)—clearly emphasising the over-riding impact of one or the other human faculty. Somewhat similar is the viewpoint of Oliver Wendell Holmes who remarks that "laughter and tears are meant to turn the wheels of the same machinery"—the former being "wind-power" and the latter "water-power" (qtd. in Leary 117-118).

From time immemorial, through the various critical theories and the diverse practices of the two genres the world over, the fact is borne out that comic elements in tragedy function in two distinct modes. It, through its guest appearance, intensifies the harrowing, gloomy atmosphere and thereby the impact of the tragedy. Obversely, through its recurrence at regulated intervals, it also makes the tragic predicament bearable. There is an in-built tendency in the human mind to be automatically switched off from the present traumatic scenario. One of the finest examples in literature of this psychological defence mechanism is found in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne, the protagonist, is made to stand on the scaffold with the letter "A" dangling upon her breast, subtly reminding one of the albatross around the Ancient Mariner's neck (Coleridge). All around her are unsympathetic, severely judging, discriminating, pitiless eyes fixed upon the letter, piercing the very heart of the great heroine. A careful perusal of this intensely dramatic scene highlights the fact that involuntarily her mind has been shut off from the scaffold in the Puritan New England colony and is roaming with Hester as a small girl in school uniform in the streets of Old England. But for this sudden transposition, derangement of the mind and clinical

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lunacy were virtually around the corner. Hence, it is proposed to undertake in this paper to apply these general theories for a detailed comment on Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, elaborating in the process the various kinds of humour and the very degrees of the aesthetic appreciation of the grim locale culminating in glimpsing of the moon-rainbow.

There are various kinds of humour beginning with the lowest crude horse-play and reaching the subtlest, almost divine level of humour when one can laugh at oneself and make oneself a butt of jokes. The latter finds its unique elaboration in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (the juxtaposition of divine and the comic is itself indicative of the supreme artist's bent of mind, wherein Dante takes his heart in both his hands and relentlessly lashes out at the follies and foibles of his contemporaries. Thereby he ceases to be a narrow, partisan patriot and rises to the transcendentalist position of a world-citizen and thus has an overview of the pitfalls of mankind.

Passing through the various phases of horse-play, linguistic humour, sardonic humour and the ironical smiles of teasing humour, the epitome is achieved in the description of the rainbow of the moon glimpsed by Piya through the assistance of Fokir:

> As she was taking in the sight, Fokir . . . traced an arc upon the darkening purple backdrop of the sky. . . . Now, as her eyes grew accustomed to the silvery light, she saw a faint spectrum of coloured light: it seemed to hang in the air for an instant and then it was gone. . . . Then his finger traced another arc in the sky, a vast one this time, spanning the horizon, and it dawned on her that he was thinking of a rainbow of some kind. Was that what he had shown her, a rainbow made by the moon? He gave her an earnest nod and she nodded too—she had seen it after all, or at least glimpsed it, so what did it matter that she had never heard of such a phenomenon before? (Ghosh 352)

Starting with the linguistic humour almost in the beginning of the novel, one finds a subtle confrontation between the diffident scientist Piya and the over-confident braggart Kanai. The irony of the situation is that he is caught on a wrong foot by Piya who unfortunately does not know even her mother tongue. The illustration is worth quoting in which Kanai shame-facedly tries to wriggle out of the tight spot he has been cornered into by Piya:

> 'So you have relatives in Calcutta then?' . . . She turned a sharp glance on him, raising an eyebrow. 'I see you still say "Calcutta". . . . Kanai acknowledged the correction with a nod. 'You're right—I should be more careful, but the re-naming was so recent that I do get confused sometimes. I try to reserve "Calcutta" for the past and "Kolkata" for the present but occasionally I slip.' (12)

As has been mentioned above, one finds an apt illustration of the crudest kind of horseplay, reminiscent of one found in the early comedies of Shakespeare, in the following encounter of Kanai and Kusum:

> 'Why do you want to look at this book? It won't make any sense to you.'
> 'Why not?'
> 'Do you know English?' Kanai demanded.
> 'No.'
> 'Then? Why are you asking?'
> She watched him for a moment, unabashed, and then sticking her fist under his nose,

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> unfurled her fingers. 'Do you know what this is?'
> Kanai saw that she had a grasshopper in her hand and his lip curled in contempt. 'Those are everywhere. Who's not seen one of those?'
> 'Look.' Lifting up her hand, Kusum put the insect in her mouth and closed her lips.
> This caught Kanai's attention and he finally deigned to lower his book. 'Did you swallow it?'
> Suddenly her lips sprang apart and the grasshopper jumped straight into Kanai's face. He let out a shout and fell over backwards, while she watched, laughing.
> 'It's just an insect,' she said. 'Don't be afraid.' (Ghosh 92)

As is common knowledge, humour is also looked upon as humour of character—as Micawberian humour in Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*, and humour of situation, best exemplified in the Restoration comedies. One of the most appropriate illustrations of the humour of situation is found in the subtle, teasing remarks of Nilima on Kanai's conduct towards women, particularly Piya. There is no doubt that this sarcasm of Nilima suddenly sinks into a grim warning for Piya: '"You're all the same, you men. Who can blame the tigers when predators like you pass for human beings?'" (Ghosh 243). No doubt, this remark of Nilima also highlights sardonic humour in the work.

Beginning with the subtle scenes pointing towards the aesthetic beauty of the tide region—perceived from both the perspectives of ebb and flow, one progressively moves towards lucid description of this charm of nature. While the former functions to release the imaginative power, the latter gratifies his aesthetic yearning by providing him a fleeting glimpse into the rarest of the rare phenomenon extant in unusual, almost supernal ecology: ". . . the moonlight had turned it into a silvery negative of its daytime image. Now it was the darkened islands that looked like lakes of liquid, while the water lay spread across the earth like a vast slick of solid metal" (154).

Ghosh subtly laughs at the credulous nature of common people and how they are befooled by quacks who name their products in an onomatopoeic manner: "Hajmozyne" and "Dardocytin" (24); of course, imitating and comically exaggerating and violently yoking together vernacular and the English trade names.

Piya showing her post-card illustration of Gangetic dolphin to Mej-da elicits a very strange response when looking "at the picture upside down" (32), he pretends to have hit the mark; though he is wide off it and calls it a "bird" (33). It creates a funny, ludicrous situation and Piya has to turn "her face aside to hide her smile" (33). Piya laughs at the human conduct and the human tendency to mortally cling to worldly possessions almost like the monkeys in the *Panchatantra* stories and the crabs in the context of fishing that has given birth to the expression "crabby behavior"–something to be mocked at but also something that human beings almost always fall a prey to:

> . . . Piya discovered what the line was for: it was pulled in with a live crab hanging on to every ninth or tenth morsel of bait. The creatures had snapped their claws on the cartilage and would not let go. Fokir and Tutul had only to peel them off with a net and drop them into a pot filled with leaves. The sight made Piya laugh: so this was where the word 'crabby' came from, a creature so stubborn that it would rather be captured than let go? (Ghosh 140)

Kusum, one of the most miserable creatures in the novel, is also one of the most "spirited, tough, and full of fun and laughter" (218). She is the one who has to literally listen to the crunching of her father's bones and to trace her mother in a wayside "brothel house" is never subdued into

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depressive pessimism. Though like Henchard and Tess, happiness in her life is "but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (Hardy 300), yet her sense of humour remains unsuppressed virtually till the end of her life.

The situation is replete with humour implied in the imagined situation of Nirmal being overwhelmed here to the point that he loses control over his lower intestines and involuntarily defecates. It is suggested thus: "*Although no one laughed, I was conscious of a mild sense of affront. 'Why, Horen,' I said, 'I have done my business already. Unless my fear reaches such a pitch as to overwhelm me, I will have no need to leave anything of myself behind'"* (Ghosh 245; italics in original).

In response to Nilima's reluctant inquiry about what language her parents used when they spoke to each other, her response is funnily absurd: '"They spoke Bengali to each other,' said Piya with a laugh. 'But that was when they were speaking, of course. When they weren't, I was their sole means of communication. And I always made them translate their messages into English—or else I wouldn't carry them'" (250).

The point worth noting here is that it suddenly acquires tragic proportions and becomes personally poignant because of Nilima being childless as Piya had unwittingly touched the sorest point of her being: '"It's a terrible thing, my dear, when a husband and wife can't speak to each other. But your parents were lucky: at least they had you to run between them. Imagine if they had no one'" (ibid).

In addition, there is implied humour in Kanai's imagined mimicking of his uncle Nirmal:

> Kanai held up a finger and pointed it to the heavens. 'All right then, comrades, listen; I'll tell you about the Matla River and a storm-struck *matal* and the *matlami* of a lord who was called Canning. *Shono, kaan pete shono*. Put out your ears so you can listen properly.' (283; italics in original)

The first thing in his narration is mockery of past and present politicians: "This laat and his *ledi* were as generous in sprinkling their names around the country as a later generation of politicians would be in scattering their ashes: you came across them in the most unexpected places—a road here, a gaol there, an occasional asylum" (283-84, italics in original).

Next, he has a dig at the public sycophancy of the people in authority. They behave almost like court jesters or fools' attendant upon royal personages:

> No matter that Ledi Canning was tall, thin and peppery—a Calcutta sweet-maker took it into his head to name a new confection after her. This sweet was black, round and sugary—in other words, it was everything its namesake was not, which was lucky for the sweet-maker because it meant his creation quickly became a success. People gobbled up the new sweets at such a rate that they could not take the time to say 'Lady Canning'. The name was soon shortened to *ledigeni*. (284; italics in original)

Humour, as Mark Twain aptly avers, is "an odd trick of speech and of spelling" (qtd. in Weber 135). Concluding his mimicry, like characteristic courses of Nirmal's speech, he ends with an elaborating quote from Rilke and humourously concludes: '"So now you know,' said Kanai, as Piya began to laugh. 'That is what Canning has been ever since that day in 1867 when the Matla stamped out the *laat*'s handiwork: a Sunday post office'" (Ghosh 288; italics in original).

When Kanai haltingly invites Piya to visit him, he perhaps is groping somehow for words to come to terms with the complete reversal of his self. There seems to be a situation of topsy-turvydom as

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far as Kanai's personality is concerned: "Piya was unsettled by the tone of Kanai's voice. She remembered her first meeting with him on the train and recalled the certainty of his stance and the imperiousness of his gestures. It was hard to square those memories with the halting, diffident manner of the man who stood before her now" (335).

An almost ethereal expression is used to heighten the impact of the charm of nature upon the sensitive self. So it goes "with the fog frothing around its bow, like whipped milk" (338).

There is an absurd, ludicrous hyperbole to lessen the terrible impact of the earlier storm narrated by Horen in which he and his uncle Bolai had made their way back to India: "That was along experience of a cyclone and the memory of it would last him through a second lifetime—he never wanted to have it repeated" (350).

Inescapably trapped and settled and metaphorically brought to knees, Piya physically thinks of calling Kanai on his cell phone:

> . . . one of them was for a cellphone. He was probably on a plane, on his way to New Delhi; or maybe he was in his office already? It would be strange to reach him: he was sure to say something that would make her laugh. She bit her lip at the thought of this: it would be good to laugh right now, with the boat groaning as if it was going to come apart at any minute. (372)

There is also in the same situation a funnily lurid image: ". . . the entire hood tore away from the boat and went sailing off into the sky, with Piya's backpack trailing behind like the streamer of a kite" (372). Unlike the lurid image, a very short smile is likely to surface up to the lips when their precarious positioning on a sturdy branch is humourously described as sitting "like a pillion rider on a motorcycle" (378).

Thoreau's viewpoint, expressed in the phrase "I weathered some merry snow storms," emphasises that a change in perspective can often transform a critical situation into a humourous one, as described by Ghosh (Thoreau 256).

There is another amusing situation when first awaken into paying "closer attention" to, Nilima tries to wriggle out from shouldering the responsibility but is foreseen and trapped by ever-quick Piya. She is left with nothing but to twist "her hands together, frowning, trying to anticipate every possible objection to Piya's plan" (Ghosh 397). But Piya has sorted out every detail and cannot be pinned down by Nilima: '"My goodness! You really have thought of everything.' Nilima gave a bark of laughter"' (398). Then there is a fine play on the word "home" and an embarrassing situation into which Piya lands herself: "Piya's choice of words surprised Nilima so much that she dropped the spoon that she was using to stir the tea leaves. 'Did I hear you right?' she said, directing a startled glance at Piya. 'Did you say "home"?'" (399-400).

Though Piya extricates herself from the embarrassing situation but it only leads to a burst of laughter from Nilima. She is too mature to be taken in by the futile effort of Piya.

In this way, one finds that even in one of the grimmest tragic works of Ghosh, comic elements function both as a reliever of gloom and its intensifier. Thus, an artistic culmination is attained by Ghosh in this novel by counterbalancing the claims of the comic and the tragic both in life and art. It is a rare achievement embodied by him in his *The Hungry Tide*. This perhaps explains why *The Sunday Times* has acclaimed it as "a marvellous novel."

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