

BLACK HUMOUR IN JOHN BARTH'S *COMING SOON!!! A NARRATIVE*

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Abstract:

John Barth, born on 27th May, 1930, is a prominent and leading contemporary postmodernist. He is an American novelist, short story writer and essayist, who has redefined fiction in America. John Barth's, *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative* was published in 2001 and has not attracted very many readers or researchers. Barth has used quite a good number of postmodern aspects in this novel like metafiction and intertextuality. The aim of this research paper is to trace the use of Black Humour in the novel *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative* by John Barth.

Introduction:

Unlike the other novels of John Barth, *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative* is quite different and complex in its very plot, narrative structure and language. Hence, though it was published in 2001 it has not attracted very many readers or researchers. As a result, it has very limited secondary resources in the form of few short reviews about the book. It is this shortcoming which has motivated the researcher to take up the herculean task of researching this novel, *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative* by John Barth.

Plot:

John Barth's *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative* is about two writers, one is a young writer who aspires to become a novelist and the other is a well experienced and an older novelist, they both enter into a competition to outdo the other.

J. Hopkins Johnson, is a twenty-four years old Novelist Aspirant, who seeks admission into the graduate program in novel writing. His parents are professors of medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical Institution. His father was a Professor of Endocrinology and mother was a Professor of Cardiology. They both did their undergraduate and med-school at Johns Hopkins Medical Institution and later got employed at their alma mater. They so loved their Institution that they named their only son after this distinguished place, Johns Hopkins Johnson. They also wished and aimed that their son should pursue Medicine at this prestigious institution. But J. Hopkins Johnson had other interests, other than medicine, like theatre, computer, hacking, video production, and rock drumming. He declared to his parents that he would major in any subject except Pre-Med and its associated sciences and would study anywhere except JHU. So he went by his own choice of becoming a drummer and technical director of 'In Your Face', which was a "Proto-Postindustrial Grunge band of likemindedly disaffected children of privilege" (19), which only lasted for a short while because of its autodestruction. Then J. Hopkins Johnson wanted to give pre-med a try at UCLA, but was able to survive only in a screenplay-writing course.

After J. H. Johnsons undergraduate course he wanted to pursue his Graduate course. Professor Emeritus recommended, Hopkins Johnson, into the graduate program in novel-writing because of his casual acquaintance with J.H. Johnsons parents. Although he doesn't have an impressive general academic record at the Johns Hopkins University, he has managed to become quite popular during his B.A. program.

Professor Emeritus, sums up about the nature of J. Hopkins Johnson, in the following lines:

the applicant is a bright, ambitious, and not untalented young man who — after an erratic high-school career, an aimless post-high-school interval, and a stumbling undergraduate start — not only “found himself” but distinguished himself, at least within our department, and who shows some promise as a budding professional. (11)

Novelist Emeritus provides information about himself in bits and pieces and in one of the lines states that “...approaching age sixty-five I was a freshly retired academic and still able senior-citizen novelist with a respectable output behind him and a not-unreasonable itch to add another, perhaps final item to that no farther” (57). He also states that his mean production time for a book was four years.

So, it is these two characters in the novel who have strong passion for writing, but have different ideas of presenting it, the experienced Novelist Emeritus wanting to stick on with his print form of the novel, while the amateur Novelist Aspirant plans to bring out his novel in electronic form, try to compete each other in this novel. Hence this novel is a story within a story, where John Barth writes a story about two writers who go about writing stories for their novel.

Black Humour:

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, Third Edition, defines ‘black humour’ or ‘black comedy’ as “a dark, disturbing, and often morbid or grotesque mode of comedy found in certain, generally postmodern texts, especially antinovels and Absurdist works. Such humor often concerns death, suffering, or other anxiety-inducing subjects. Black humor

usually goes hand in hand with a pessimistic worldview or tone, expressing a sense of hopelessness in a wry, sardonic, and grimly humorous way” (42).

The Columbia Encyclopaedia, 6th edition, states that “black humor, in literature, drama, and film, grotesque or morbid humor used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of the modern world. Ordinary characters or situations are usually exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony. Black humor uses devices often associated with tragedy and is sometimes equated with tragic farce.” (www.encyclopedia.com/reference/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/black-humor)

Encyclopaedia Britannica states that “black humor, also called black comedy, writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life. Black humour often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character.” (www.britannica.com/topic/black-humor)

Alice C. Tyler in her thesis titled “An Analysis of the Major Characteristics of American Black Humor Novels” states that, “Black Humor takes these traditional literary taboos one step further: it presents them, emphasizes them, glorifies them, and then laughs at them...The writer of Black Humor writes with these vey taboos as his subjects. To him nothing is sacred—rather, everything is absurd. It is pointless to forbid certain topics for discussion, and such a guise is simply another part of the absurdity Black Humor philosophy delineates. As a result, some of the most prevalent topics in Black humor novels are sex, bathroom scenes, money, religion, and death, their absurdity emphasized and touched with laughter” (69). (https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc663755/m2/1/high_res_d/1002773716-Tyler.pdf)

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Black humour is generally associated with death and suffering, but it is also generally considered that black humour deals with the traditionally forbidden taboos like sex, bathroom scenes, religion, money and also extended to farce, low comedy and “ordinary characters or situations” that “are usually exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony” (www.encyclopedia.com/reference/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/black-humor).

John Barth is well known for the use of black humour in his novels. He has also used it in *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative*, not as it is usually defined as morbid or grotesque mode of comedy, but as a traditionally forbidden taboo. Barth presents such forbidden taboos like sex, bathroom scenes, sexual parts of the body, and unpleasant things that cannot be spoken in public with emphasis and glorifies them, which are just intended to be laughed at them. In *Coming Soon!!! A Narrative*, John Barth talks about the sex of Ditsy, who is neither a male nor a female, “Ditsy-Belle, Ditsy-Boy: I’ve done time in my time as mainly male and ditto feem; have attained the age where what’s between my legs matters less to either of us than what’s between my ears or just twixt you and me” (1-2). Here, it is so delicate and a sensitive issue to talk about the sex of a person who is neither a male nor a female, but Barth glorifies it with his witty use of language, by saying that what really matters is knowledge and intelligence, that is the brain which is between the ears than what is between the legs, which determines the sex. On a literal sense, it could also mean that for propping what one needs is good eyes, which is between the ears than what is between the legs. In both the sense Barth’s witty lines makes one oversee the sex of the person spoken about and just laugh at it.

Similarly, while Ditsy is propping on the seashore after the storm Zulu, he/she comes across used condoms, which is revealed in the following lines:

Go ye forth a-progging for a certain length of half-inch braided nylon dockline or a spare red plastic fuel funnel, and you'll turn up a brace of used condoms like tired sea-nettles (but Day-Glo green, with ticklers), a snarl of fishermen's monofilament, a former spaniel, and the usual Big Mac boxes and Coors beer cans. (3-4)

Here, Barth presents and emphasises the traditional taboo and describes it by comparing it with "sea-nettles". He doesn't stop with just the comparison. He further talks about it thus,

...also the aforementioned brace of French-ticklered French letters (good as new once inside-outed, rinsed in Backwater Creek, air-dried, and recocked for firing; you never know who might turn up, and a girl can't be too careful these days with all them Ess Tee Dees floating 'round the d'accord?) (4)

While people hesitate to talk about the use of condoms, Barth talks about the used condoms and reusing it, which is so unpleasant, yet it creates a kind of awkward humor in its description and generates laughter which is the hallmark of black humour.

Yet another place in the novel, the toilet episode, where the Novelist Aspirant and the Novelist Emeritus happen to meet, exhibits John Barth's ultimate mastery of Black Humour at its best. An ordinary, mundane and not so important daily activity, of which people feel shy and uncomfortable to talk about or rather don't care to talk about, is treated with such detailing, at times unpleasant mixed with a bit of elegance stands as a perfect example of Black Humour.

I stepped into the toilet stall, where, after my customary brief uncertainty whether to raise the horseshoe-style seat or leave it down and aim more carefully— for in the former case, having handled the seat, oughtn't I really go wash my hands before as

well as after handling my equipment?, which I knew I wouldn't; and in the latter, oughtn't I to wipe my inevitable droplets off that seat for the next customer's sake?, which I knew I wouldn't either— I opted for the second as usual, fetched forth the male instrument of urinary relief and erotic gratification, and deployed it briskly to the frequenter of those, reminded as oft I am, a-pissing, of that steady stream one notes discharging from the sides of moored vessels, usually just above the waterline...Peed then, retucked and -zipped and, leaving seat-cleanup for him who next thereon must sit and ought routinely to wipe it anyhow, don't You agree?, I exited the stall and washed my hands posturinarily like the good doctors' son I am, noting side-of-my-eye that the old guy was still at it... "As your decades pass faster," GreatUnc Ennie observed from over there, "your water passes slower..."...I held out my still-wet-from-washing right hand to shake his; having shaken His, he tucked and zipped, raised a cautionary finger, and before shaking my hand washed both of his while I blow-dried mine. When then I made again to shake, he dangled his palms-down to indicate Wet and took my place at the hand-dryer as previously at the wash basin. (77-78)

Conclusion:

These incidents in the novel are not at all of any significance or importance. They even don't add any meaning or provide any solution to any problem, but Barth's use of language and his treatment of black humour makes it noticeable and provides a temporary relief during the mundane reading of the text which also reflects the absurd, meaningless and mundane lifestyle of the current society in which talking about and laughing at such traditional taboos provides a temporary relief.

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