



Humour and irony as tools of social critique and self-preservation in Shobha de's fictional oeuvre

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Abstract

The present research paper is an endeavor to examine Shobha De's use of humour and irony in her fictional works. The paper argues that these works are not only for entertainment, but also tools for social critique and self-preservation. Her characters use witty and ironic dialogue to challenge discriminatory norms and values prevalent in contemporary society. De's works target issues like the dominance of patriarchy in the marriage system, complicated gender roles, and shallow social rituals that suppress women. This indirect method of criticism allows them to give voice to criticism safely without any social conflict. It helps her to protect their emotional well-being and dignity in the social milieu. The paper shows the creation of a safe space for rebellion through humour. It allows her characters to question oppressive power structures without direct confrontation with the social structure. Thus, De's fictional oeuvre is an epitome of laughter as a medium for coping with and criticizing society.

Keywords: Shobha de, humour, irony, social criticism, self-preservation, gender roles

Introduction

Humour and irony are more than mere entertainment while interacting with the people in society. They are important tools for social criticism and self-preservation, which allow people to challenge oppressive structures while protecting their psychological well-being. By examining the dynamics of marriage, gender performance, cultural expectations, and political dissent, it is clear that humour and irony have dual and connected purposes: allowing criticism and maintaining survival within a narrow and constricting system.

The strategic value of humour is increased to a political weapon under circumstances of repression or suppression. As analyzed in *Indian Popular Fiction*, the spoof film *Nasbandi* (1978) used many comic scenes as a "strategic device to critique the Emergency period when direct criticism would have been dangerous" (Srivastava and Sinha 157). In such circumstances, humour is necessary for the self-preservation of artists who avoid censorship and retribution. The "relentless mockery" in such satires snatched a "freewheeling mandate which goes impressively beyond the acceptable bounds of academic discourse," which transforms the Emergency into a "common, endured experience" (160). This popular humour is an accessible and subversive social critique, which is beneficial in preserving collective memory against state-sponsored oblivion. The irony is a mirror to the "bizarre excesses of the Emergency" by portraying them in the "bizarre excessiveness" of the cinematic form (160).

Humour and Irony as Tools of Social Critique and Self-preservation

The characters of Shobha De use ironic humour to deal with gendered expectations within marriage. In *Second Thoughts*, the protagonist boldly gives voice to her marital anxiety. Maya states, "Men do get sick of their wives," to which her husband Ranjan dismissively replies, "That's true. But not this soon. Let's see. how long have we been married—do you remember?" (De 213). In the aforementioned quote, Maya's serious concern is met with a joke by her husband. It highlights the power imbalance that

trivializes and is not concerned about her emotional needs. Her quiet "sadness" while searching for her husband's socks shows her domestic routines as a literal and metaphorical cover for her deep-seated discontent. This irony is a critique of the social norms placing wives as permanent objects rather than evolving individuals. This indirect approach is essential for her self-preservation as it allows her to question her confinement without any dangerous confrontation.

This theme is portrayed with darker humour in the novels of Shobha De. When Ranjan calls from Delhi sounding unusually happy, Maya's internal monologue reveals deep despair: she is tempted to say, "No, I'm not at all okay. In fact, I'm thinking of killing myself right after I put down the phone." Instead, she just mumbles "anything. Wifely sounds" (De 264). The shocking hyperbole of her imagined response is a symbolic representation of her isolation in marital life. The irony is in the gap between her internal reality and the superficial role she performs in her life. The dark humour used in this quote points out the emotional work expected from wives while also letting her release stress in her life. She transforms her pain into ironic remarks. She comes out of the pain quietly without an outburst that might push others away. It helps her a lot to stay emotionally steady and empowered in her life.

Humour is also used to criticize the patriarchal privilege in the domestic life of female characters. In *Spouse: The Truth About Marriage*, De has precisely used irony to bluntly criticize the old traditions. It is described in a scene where "Men are served before women, regardless of age, with young boys sitting down comfortably with older members of the clan, leaving arthritic grandmothers to hobble around carrying large serving bowls of dal and subzi" (De 66). The dark humour is depicted through the exaggerated but recognizable contrast between male comfort and female labour among the elderly female characters as well. This comedic framing of the scenes has made the criticism of "absurdity and injustice" more palatable and memorable than direct criticism. This humorous way of ridiculing is self-preservation for writers and readers. It creates critical distance from the customer and allowing its rejection without getting angry.

The roles of gender and tradition is another topic for ironic humour. E. Dawson Varughese argues that characters in chick lit treat rituals as planned performances. The actions they use while observing rituals are deliberate to show the way others see them. A character's participation in Karva Chauth is described as "good PR for Misha, an opportunity for her to integrate with the bhadrakal in her neighbourhood" (Reading New India 48). In the aforementioned statement, the religious ritual is labelled as "public relations," which is a comic way of reframing that unmasks the instrumental use of tradition. This irony is a critique of community expectations by portraying the ceremony as social theatre. It is also a survival tactic for women in urban areas. Performing tradition with a knowing wink is a gesture towards social acceptance without full internal buy-in for Misha. The humour used by Shobha De is successful in exposing social hypocrisy while documenting self-preservation through strategic compliance with the rituals.

This performative compliance is portrayed in a novel titled *Socialite Evenings*, where characters use self-deprecatory humour as a defence while interacting with the people in society. Karuna reduces her friend Ritu to "instant coffee"—"an immediate pick-me-up"—and when questioned, retorts, "No, you dummy, I'm insulting you. I'm marginalizing you. I'm reducing you to a beverage. Satisfied?" (De 197). This self-aware humor criticizes the superficiality of their social world, where people are not genuinely connected with each other. It is a shield for the narrator, which allows her to express feelings of marginalization from her marriage through light-hearted humour. She is successful in preserving her relationships and emotional well-being by joking about her criticism. This is the way to avoid the vulnerability of a serious confession about others. The humour is both a criticism of disposable interactions and a strategy to deal with them without any emotional drain.

The use of humour is very helpful for people in addressing the issues that are otherwise difficult to discuss openly. In *Socialite Evenings*, Ritu openly announces, "I did it," she crowed," regarding her extramarital affair. The Karuna responds to her with exaggerated language: "You're behaving like a raging nympho. Control yourself, woman" (De 246). This scandalous subject is normally discussed using hyperbolic humour. It is a safe space for exploring alternative lifestyles. De has systematically allowed her characters to challenge marital norms without directly standing against the brutal patriarchal structures. The humour is social critique, which treats the scandalous affairs as excitement and agency and not as a moral failure of the characters. It is a self-preservation for the characters. It is a type of rebellion and bold confession while maintaining social standing through the protective coating of a joke.

Conclusion

Humour and irony are tools for the powerless to be powerful, across various texts and contexts. In the domestic sphere, they are very helpful in allowing women to critique marital norms and brutal patriarchal traditions while preserving their emotional well-being and social standing among others. In the large cultural contexts, they empower characters to construct their own identity and subvert rigid expectations through just performative compliance and wit. In the political sphere, they are very important for articulating disagreement, which preserves collective

memory, and imagines the democratic alternatives under authoritarian rule. Whether through a sad irony of a wife, sharp banter of a socialite, or absurd spoof of a filmmaker, these devices are a double-edged sword: they cut through pretence and injustice with a critique of society, while the handle wields for self-preservation, as it is a human need. They prove that laughter is not an escape from reality, but it is a way of being involved with it, surviving it, and challenging it to be better in the future.

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