

# **Critical Study of Human Conditions Reflected in Manu Joseph's *The Illicit Happiness of Other People***

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## ***Abstract***

*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* a novel by Manu Joseph portrays average middle class Indian family. The degradation of the family members lead them to their own misfortune. The devastated family is the centre of such elaboration of the worst human condition. Frailties and follies of all four members of family is the primary source for their own misfortune. Satire plays very important part in narration to expose this human condition intermixing with comic elements. Thus serious theme of the main plot is presented with comic vision. Nihilism is the philosophical approach towards such devastated human condition. Thoughts of characters and author's comments on the several incidents designate this philosophical concept hidden in the main plot.

**Key words:** *devastation of family, frailties and follies, feminine passivity, satire on poverty, middle class womanhood, philosophical vision, nihilism, pessimism*

## **• Introduction:**

*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* by Manu Joseph first published in 2012 is the novel describes average Indian family. There is detailed exposition of human conditions at various stages. Reflection of human conditions is the significant feature of post-modernist novels. It includes degradation of human life accompanying with harsh realism. Exact criticism on the human conditions is the main element influenced in the novel of Manu Joseph. However with the use of abundant puns, comic descriptions and thoughtful statements he illustrates the

human condition as it is throughout the main characters. His novel *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is a collage of such segments which reveal the condition of human being in several aspects. These conditions have certain philosophical and literary dimensions which has been attempted to discuss in the present study of the novel. There are three important aspects as below.

- **Frailties and Follies:**

Novel *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is the collection of four unsuccessful family members. These members themselves are responsible for their present situation. Ousep Chacko's family is the gathering of four unsuccessful people bind together.

Main protagonist Ousep Chacko is the most unsuccessful head of family who is alcoholic and depressed father due to sudden loss of his elder son. He is irregular about his duties and have lost jobs several times. As far as the degradation of human life due to their own fate is concerned Ousep Chacko is the exact representation of the required personality. He is a journalist by profession; but the professional attribution has not been reflected throughout his personality. He is presented as a looser in family. As a head of family he is more responsible for the worst condition of his family. Ousep's son Unni Chacko is a very clever, self-questioning and very mystic figure in this novel. Ousep is actually searching for the reason of suicide of his son Unni after three years of his death. This vast time lagging- three years waiting and sudden realisation to know the mystery behind the death of son is also significant to know the lethargic family members in such a serious issue. Inborn nature and strange curious habits of Unni lead him towards his own end. He is presented as a philosopher, sage and the mystic monk for the quest of real salvation who want to solve the mystery of life. At the end of the novel Ousep finds out that the exact reason behind the suicide of Unni was not his philosophical nature but the accidental seduction of teenage girl Mythili. Then these all whatever assemblage of best ideas fitted with Unni's personality dropped down suddenly. In such a way Unni is also a looser. The cause and mystery of life which he was going to solve make him intermingled into the new complications which leads him towards the path of committing suicide. His search is neither for good nor for evil but only curious without any proper direction as quoted by Livingston,

*Morality is not directly presented in the novel, nor is happiness. Possible psychiatric clarifications are put forth for some of Unni's more strange philosophical ideas. (1, Livingston)*

Other two characters Mariamma and Thoma play minor but significant part in this novel. Mariamma is presented as an average Indian housewife. Her main goal is to focus on serving bread and butter except philosophical adventures done by her son and husband. She is the keen observer of the unfortunate life lived by her family. She is eager to defeat poverty due to joblessness of her husband. She is worried about the curious nature of her elder son, but due to feminine passivity she can't overcome the fate overpowered on them. Her son Thoma is the youngest member of family who is depicted as a stupid, confused young boy. He is very poor in academic development. Paradoxically Mariamma is worrying about the extra intellect of her elder son Unni and poor intellect of her younger son Thoma.

Thus frailties of the Chacko's family are the result of their own deeds. They themselves are the main cause to make their end tragic. Human conditions reflected by Joseph is mentioned as *The novel is a journey through the minds of various individuals who remind us of our frailties, small successes, huge fears and our will to always be happy*(56,Pius). Thus author has tried to universalise the sorrows and suffering of one family to represent human life in general.

### • **Satire on Indian Society:**

*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is the perfect satire on Indian society. In this short novel one can find the panorama of average Indian family residing in the Metro city. Actually main theme of the novel is very serious. Father Ousep Chacko is searching for the exact reason behind the suicide of his son Unni. Along with this serious tone Joseph has commented as well as criticised Indian society in very excellent way. He pinned out the minute Indian mind lurking around the family hives. Although Mariamma is shown in very serious manner, other women and their social attitudes in Balaji Lane have been criticised in comic way. The Indian stamp of womanhood has been depicted in very excellent way. The women in Balaji Lane when encountered to any widow they have fixed a stereotype in their mind as,

*Every woman in Block A is keeping a close watch on that lady, who has decided not to wear a white sari as widows do, nor does she have a Usha Tailoring Machine on which widows sew with a sad face. That woman is under a lot of pressure to look sad, and even when she does something as ordinary.*

(166, Joseph)

In above lines one can find a perfect Indian satire on the middle class womanhood. There is feminine collective attitude present in Balaji Lane which decide how the widow should be. The use of 'Usha tailoring machine' and 'white saree' is the impact of Bollywood movies representation of Indian widows.

Romantic emotion like love is also satirised in very excellent way. The platform for love making is Metro city like Madras,

*The fate of love in Madras is neatly divided into four kinds of suicide. Lovers who know that their parents will never let them marry go to a cheap hotel room, get into wedding clothes and eat rat poison. If they elope instead, their parents will consume the same rat poison.* (171, Joseph)

One can easily understand the paradox used in the last statement. Joseph has criticised both lovers and their worrying parents as well. This is the worst human condition of love in the metro city in satirical manner. Sometimes Balaji Lane is resembling as Liliput of *Gulliver's Travels*.

As discussed earlier Thoma the younger son of Ousep is the perfect satire on school education system in India. His confusing nature, lethargic habits and inactiveness make him an effective target for perfect satire on school education. He always thinks about the silly notions about petty things. He is not so serious about the sudden death of his elder brother but more than he is eager to know the exact reason behind why his brother did commit suicide. This lack

of seriousness and excess of eagerness has been reflected in his nature after the death of Unni. School and exams are the toughest things in the world according to Thoma. His struggle for minimal passing in science and maths is satirised as below,

*Millions of years later, new humans might rise and they might build a new world that would look very different from everything Thoma knows. But the pass mark in science and maths would still be thirty-five per cent. (90, Joseph)*

This is the perfect example of sarcasm -figure of speech. Previous sentence express the dignity of thought while later sentence wipe out the earlier effect and ridicules Thoma's exact feeling. Apart from content this also proves the kind of comic thoughts going on in Thoma's mind. He is having such like funny ideas in his mind.

The poverty of Chacko family is the result of their own fate. There is internal force which has made them poor. But nobody has daring to fight against the fate. They are also accepting whatever served by the destiny. This is the reason behind the satirical presentation of their poverty. Joseph comments on the baseless reasons behind the losing jobs by Ousep. Passivity of Mariamma also criticised under the influence of womanhood. Here is the excellent illustration of their poverty,

*Yet, in that house, the life of Colgate is squeezed out of it until it is a flat strip of thin tortured metal. Then it is violated by toothbrushes and even index fingers for several days. The brushes are not thrown away until almost all the bristles disappear, and after the brushes do die in this autumnal way, the two postgraduates and their son use their fingers to clean their teeth until Mariamma somehow makes new brushes appear. (42, Joseph)*

This is very realistic and perfect satire. Note the use of words like 'the life of Colgate' which symbolise the life of family itself. Words 'the two postgraduates' for Ousep and Mariamma is an excellent metonymy. Simple and well known domestic idea is presented in very strong literary vision. This is the main strength of a perfect satire which obtains its sources in the real life and present its vision at superior level. Thus serious matter with comic description is used to create satire on human conditions in day to day life.

- **Nihilism:**

*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is a psychological thriller. Main protagonist Ousep Chacko's quest for the exact reason behind his son Unni's suicide is the main thematic action in this novel. There are several dimensions to this strange quest. One of the major aspect is philosophical aspect of Nihilism. The term Nihilism is mostly related to the postmodernist literature which responded to the post world war effects in European Literature. *It is the belief that life has no meaning or purpose and that religious and moral principles have no value.* (Nihilism) Further it signifies for meaningless, uselessness of life and in such a way a mean attitude towards human life. This thought has been elaborated throughout the thinking and behaviour of Unni in this novel. He is a strange philosopher. His all philosophical statements about life and human being are very pessimistic. Thus he is the nihilist figure in this novel. So study of this aspect to know about the human condition is very necessary in such context.

Unni is very strange character. His thoughts about God and divinity are very surprising. According to Unni,

*The world .....is the strongest evidence to support the ridiculous hypothesis that life will continue as usual after I am dead'. (140, Joseph)*

He is not worrying about his death but about the world after his death. Note the use of contrast in the words like presence of world around Unni and the continuation of life after his death.

For Unni God is,

*God is not a lie but some kind of an abridged version of this reality, a beginner's course that has been misunderstood. (148, Joseph)*

In the both above statements there is a perfect criticism on the divinity. God is a misunderstood phenomenon. Human himself has been marginalised at such extend to criticise his own creator in the course of pessimism. Unni is the mouthpiece introducing thoughts of Joseph. Total meaninglessness has slight touch of optimism as far as the criticism on the divinity is concerned. Joseph does not raise the question about existence of God and religion but he claims these both concepts are misused and having lost their main purpose.

After religion and divinity the main target of nihilism is towards the language. Unni comments on language as how it has hidden the truth. He states to his friend Sai Shankaran as below,

*Language was created by nature to guard its secrets, not to reveal them. We are trapped in language. Even thought has become language. That is what nature wants, Sai. It has given us language because it has hidden the truth somewhere else. (149, Joseph)*

Truth which Unni was searching was very mystic .In modern philosophy the language has made responsible to hide the secrets of universal truth. Unni consciously thinks about how to solve this problem of conveying truth without communication through language. He tries to simplify the concept. For him reality has two ways to judge the perfect truth. Where Unni comments about the problem of language communication as below,

*Unni feels trapped in the austerity of human communication, 'he is trapped in language'. He wonders whether there is a way he can convey what he has seen to others. Convey the message that reality is very different from what people imagine. According to Unni, all of nature is a timeless contest between two forces – absolute reality, which is the true state of all matter, and the 'syndicate of life', which does not want its organisms to see the truth. (226, Joseph)*

Further in the novel these both terms 'absolute reality' and 'syndicate of life' represented as the main source to experience the exact truth. That's why Unni's death is also mystic. Reality which Unni has experienced is doubtful and infinite beyond the human power. This nihilism resulted into pessimism and became the tragic source for the devastation of family. Human condition criticised through nihilism is the exact philosophical attribution

towards the thoughtful and mysterious personality of Unni. Manu Joseph himself accepts sorrow resulted by nihilism and pessimism as the source of perfect creation. He says,

*There are a lot of artists who have made a good living from melancholy.....Their gift is that they're able to absorb a lot of skit and write about it – grim, dreary things. And I look at them with a lot of suspicion, and I try to understand, is there a literary value here or is it the value of sorrow?" (quoted in Livingston)*

Thus even if nihilism is pessimistic notion there is perfect creative influence hidden behind the curtain of meaninglessness. Today's worst condition may have certain brighter future for spirit of creating tomorrows new world. This is Joseph's idea behind nihilistic approach.

### • Conclusion:

Human condition depicted by Manu Joseph is the result of his own experience as an author. Devastated family itself is the representation of this drastic human conditions. Unsuccessful family members along with the plot of psychological thriller is the exact background to present such a brilliant idea. Satire is the strongest element in this novel. Even if it is represented for the four family members of Ousep Chacko's family, it portrays average Indian mind in this literary frame. Comic descriptions and punning statements play very important role in this context. Impact of satirical narration is so strong that sometimes reader may forget the serious theme of the novel about the search of reason behind Unni's suicide. Apart from narrative style; nihilism is the philosophical backbone of this novel. Human condition has been perfectly presented by the exact notion of nihilism. Pessimism resulted through nihilism conclude the undesired ends to ongoing quest in this novel.

Finally it is to be concluded that the human condition presented in *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* by Manu Joseph is neither realistic nor ideal but the result of perfect literary creation. Remarkably it has dimensions of satirical as well as philosophical vision which come forth to represent 'Illicit Happiness' hidden in an Indian Mind.

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