

# Representation of Postmodern Trauma through the trope of Dark Comedy in the novels of Iris Murdoch, Muriel Sparks and Barbara Pym

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## ABSTRACT

The research paper is a work to understand the theory of subjectivity in designing one's identity in a postmodern world and how the factors challenging identity is represented through Dark comedy. The Research problem in this project is the complication produced by giving an elevated position to the dark humour and it's far reaching impact on the modern as well as postmodern lives. Comedy as a genre is treated in a minimal level serving the purpose of laughter only. The Research gaps found in the paper might be due to the absence of quantitative data, but the following objective aims to fulfil the paper's purpose such as to address the significance of comedy as a serious genre and transforming serious issues to a lighter one. It also focuses on analysing the problems of loss, internal conflict, and traumas of the characters in relation to a postmodern world which is enhanced by cultural and capitalist institutions. Another significant tenet is to depict the experimental mode undertaken by female writers to blend both tragedy and serious humour as opposed to limitations set by male writers. This experimental research sheds light on the use of dark humour amalgamated with personal inner conflicts especially through the lens of three female writers Barbara Pym, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Sparks- all of them less dominating yet experimental female writers. The concept of humour is always used as a channel to trivialise the significant, hard and complex issues pertaining to one's life. Here the female writers have inadvertently highlighted the essence of bringing madness in sharing their life traumas. An attempt to evoke laughter not because of the lightness of their circumstances but due to the burden and intensity of their pain and providing pleasure to the readers by substantiating it with bitter sweet comedy.

## KEYWORDS

Postmodernism, Dark humour, serious humour, Postmodern Subject, Black Comedy, Fragmented Identity

## INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is an era of upheavals and disruptions emerging due to the Second World War Postmodern literature is an exemplification of the external mental chaos by experimenting with multiple new narrative techniques. The characters in the postmodern novels are portrayed as disrupted subjects struggling to find meaning in their lives. This internal, psychological turmoil of the characters is manifested through the disrupted, fragmented, non-linear narrative used by the writers. Post modernity is a critical reaction to the contemporary society that identifies itself with loss of faith in progress and splintering of the universal projects of speculation and emancipation. It gives a detailed view of a multicultural world couched within the modern that is equipped with the industrialisation of production, rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth, systems of mass communication along with the transformation of scientific knowledge into technology. In this paper, I wish to depict the traumas of living life as a punishment, a brutal realisation, through the trope of Black comedy. As an experiment, the authors, here female authors have used 'serious humour' to bring out the futility of life by not pining at them, but by mocking at the pain and anguish each character undergoes. Serious comedy or black humour sounds hysterically funny, philosophically sane; it might suffice the need to resolve the problems of existential against offering a major challenge. Simon Critchley states, "Humour is practically enacted theory that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our own lives" (Diack, 77).

This defines the impact of postmodernism and expressing the futility of life through dark comedy which evokes laughter even at the serious issues faced by the characters. The characters reveal the psychological conditions that shape their fragmented identity. The authors have not presented the mishaps, the contingencies of these characters in a negative connotation, rather in a hysterical manner which induces both the readers as well as the characters to dilute the pain and suffering.

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research paper is to understand the theory of subjectivity in designing one's identity in a postmodern world and how the factors challenging identity is represented through Dark comedy. The following objective aims to fulfil the paper's purpose:

- To address the significance of comedy as a serious genre and transforming serious issues to a lighter one.
- To analyse the problems of loss, internal conflict, traumas of the characters in relation to a postmodern world which is enhanced by cultural and capitalist institutions?
- To depict the experimental mode undertaken by female writers to blend both tragedy and serious humour as opposed to limitations set by male writers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Postmodern Era is defined by the chaos and turmoil caused due to the World War 2. In the literature revolving around the period, the problems of the character seem absurd, meaningless yet humorously menacing. The Literature Review is an illumination on the various articles revolving around the themes of the seriousness of humour, comedy as an experiment in the works of women authors, portrayal of characters in postmodern novels, finding goodness and ethics in a chaotic world and the question of subjectivity in a postmodern world.

## THE SERIOUS HUMOR

Peter Farb's essay on humor explores the various dimensions of humor from a "frivolous pursuit" to a defense mechanism. W.C. states that "it's fruitless to talk about humour, a difficulty to talk about humor is that it destroys laughter". Apart from the trivial factors, humor is the complex hallmarks of our humanity. It sets a certain pattern of paradoxes. Understanding jokes requires a certain parameter of intellectuality but a rigorous effort might break away the impact of the joke. Some scholars consider humor as a socially adaptive way of handling one's problems while some believe that it is a destructive, an aggressive force. The concept of humor has received ample negative and positive criticisms. Francis Bacon said "it marked a deformity in human nature". Humor has a hygienic angle to it which serves the purpose of preventing mental disease and even works miracle cures in those fatally inflicted. Humor has a complex base which is a manifestation of the dark, irrational side of our human nature. It stems from causes which are as yet imperfectly understood. This imperfection is depicted as a "mocking laughter, a nervous cackle, a suppressed giggle, a jovial chuckle an uncontrolled roar". Humor relieves tension within the group by providing an arena for the expression of doubts about the society in a socially sanctioned way. It helps in dissipating anger and reduces conflicts in society. Events of murder, accidents, death, can be represented as grim yet hysterically humorous where the horror is subdued by humor.

## HUMOR AS AN EXPERIMENTAL TOOL FOR WOMEN

Women's use of comedy or humor is a revolutionary practice. Jaye Berman questions "if humor is rooted in anger and aggression, does it provide the most adequate and constructive outlet for this emotional energy?" There is an exemplification of the radicalness in women's humor, its supposed power to subvert and revolutionize male, patriarchal language and society. The essay "Women's Humor" traces the application of humor harking back to the Restoration Age, Victorian Age where Aphra Behn and Jane Austen experimented with humor as a mocking source as well as to depict the trivial respectively. They induce mockery by eluding authority through irony. Critics view laughter as an "emotional disguise" that evades discrimination. Laughter that constitutes "moral evasion". Carol Hanbery Mackay states that "women humorists need to transform anger into an aesthetic form that communicates and serves others". The aggressive humor is a male entity which has a Victorian restriction associated with it which is now experimented by female writers. Modern female authors like Virginia Woolf produce "savage comedy" expressing civilization as a powerful force directed against the "savagery ingrained in the structures of culture. Lisa Meril in her essay highlights "anger in women's humor. Female comedians claim that their humor is an expression of a uniquely female consciousness. Wendy Wasserstein argues that women use comedy as a defense, that it has a cathartic potential "to release the pain" of disappointment and rejection. She optimistically suggests that a sense of humor develops in a person as a result of subjection to life's onslaught. A display of irony and awareness of absurdity underlines humorous expression of multiple tragedies that we experience daily. A jovial, funny take on things indicates the nonassertive, self- alienated and poorly communicating individual.

## THE POSTMODERN SUBJECT: DISRUPTED SUBJECT

The notion of subjectivity appeals to the notion of a core humanity where the subject determines its own conditions of existence. The subject is influenced by many external factors and majorly culture. The Postmodern subject is an entity of exaltation and disintegration. A psychoanalytic theory poses a challenge to modern humanism culminating in the rewriting of the subject through "accounts of the unconscious and desire". The theory focusses on the decentering of the subject, the "I Think". According to Freud, the human consciousness is supplemented by an unconscious reserve. "The unconscious has a significant influence on the desires, motivations and interactions that shape the course of our everyday existence". The unconscious is necessary for human life. It acts a repository for all those thoughts and impulses that are too disturbing for conscious reflection and repressed by the mind. Unconscious drives and desires supplement the thoughts and actions of a self-aware, rational subject who is a product of psychoanalysis. Our lives are attuned to a reality principle that allows us to defer pleasure for rational ends. Human lives strive to strike a balance to meet their ends. Lacan too describes about human desire which is engineered by culture. He states "Desires shape our sense of who we are and drives our every interaction with the world which seems impossible to fulfil a reciprocal recognition between self and the other. Helen Cixous asserts that women can unproblematically adopt a masculine identity so as to compete on equal terms with men, rather the opposition itself needs to be resisted and embrace multiplicity inherent in all identities. Another essay, "The Postmodern Subject: The Inhuman, Cyborgs and Matrices" in which the idea of identity as a performance and the impact of the technological innovations associated with post modernity produce even more radical assaults on modern subjectivity. The essay highlights the key concerns pertaining to the relationship shared between human and technology.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the research paper is solely qualitative in nature. The Research is a compendium of Textual references foregrounded on the Primary Texts and Online Journals from Academic sites. These sources provide a theoretical framework to

understand the idea of Black comedy and the expression of the same in a postmodernist Era. Each article gives a glimpse of the varied aspects of understanding comedy, dark comedy and the impact it creates on the narrative as well as the characterization.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Serious Humor- Black Comedy as a serious genre

Comedy is commonly understood as a form known for its triviality, non-seriousness, as opposed to the seriousness associated with Tragedy. Humor is seen as a marginal component of the artistic-aesthetic debate where the seriousness of humor is underestimated. It is often believed to be a slippery and an evanescent phenomenon which is capable of only evoking laughter. Its serious impact is majorly diluted due to its light and flighty approach. It has the ability to arouse laughter by inflicting pain paving way to unsettling undertones. It might be termed as farcical, satirical; a state of mockery to embrace a mode of light heartedness, but comedy might be pitiless, intense and dark too. Peter Farb in his essay states, "Humor is the most complex hallmarks of our humanity as it forms an elaborate set of paradoxes" (Farb, 762). Dark Comedy or Black Humor intensifies the trappings of grief and perceptions of reality and catastrophe and transforms them into a sort of running gag. Serious Comedy can be discerned through an intellectual ability that disregards pain and trauma and yet embraces its creativity in dealing with tragedy.

'Gallows Humour' or 'Cruel Joke' or 'sick humour' delineates a disruption of tender sentiments in conditions of physical and mental handicaps producing an absurd and meaningless effect. It brings the nonsense and absurd in the misfortunes, ignorance and the menaces of the characters or people in the society. The tool of grim humour maintains the balance between aggression and laughter induced by the serious yet callous and ridiculous situations. These episodes of hilarity might be dimensions of pain, trauma, physical and mental disability endured. These then are diminutive of the painfully funny circumstances. The reality is a continuously illusory construction where sufferings and mishaps are bound to which humour helps in analysing the situation of illusion. In the novels by Barbara Pym, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Sparks there is an unmasking of the vanities and the harsh realities of society couched in the essence of humor that denigrates the misconception that it is a frivolous pursuit. Lise in *The Driver's seat*, Austin in *An Accidental Man* and Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Woman* can be perceived as perfect synonyms to the tragic characters marvelling comic timings. Lise, in *The Driver's seat* is disrobed of her identity due to the mechanical world around her which is presented in a funny manner. The funny is understood in terms of the transhuman synthetic life Lise undergoes. Humour achieves a status of labelled as an extraordinarily complex subject.

The novel also hinges upon the mechanic existence of human beings, turning them into inhuman species. The hilarity of this is evident in the novel when Lise is enlightened about the macrobiotic restaurant which follows a strict regime of consuming cereals only with very little liquid. The process is termed as 'Regime Seven'. It is a condition that is bound to overrule the lives of Human beings, a scientific transformation in the postmodern world. It may sound funny and humorous, but the absurdity lies in reducing human beings to the 'technological inhuman'. The humanist ideas of self identity are completely disrobed due to the intervention of Technology. It leads to a painful recognition of dehumanised selves suppressed by the amalgamation of Technology and capitalism. In another episode, we see that funny has multiple dimensions, here one that is darkly structured and venerated for its critical framework. "Laughing as she goes her way, laughing without possibility of restraint, like a stream bound to descend whatever slope is before it" (Sparks, 58). There is chaos, commotion in a place that she resides in, she cannot recall which place it is, her fair, colourful clothes is what makes her stand out and help people recognise her. The overcrowding, the overpopulation is ridiculed by her; she calls it an unmastered hysteria to which she responds thus, "It's best never to be born. I wish my mother and father had practiced birth control. I wish that pill had been invented at the time. I feel sick, I feel terrible" (Sparks, 67). Sparks plays with the idea of Religion, her loss of spirit and religious faith is imbibed through Mr Fiedke who ostracised his sister for challenging religion and Lise responds and says, Macrobiotics is a way of life. Sparks presents her skilful mastery in using satire to expose the human folly and absurdities of reality to a God like an authorial identity that reflects the Catholic concepts of pre-destination, punishment and redemption.

Austin in *An Accidental Man*, fits perfectly in the category of the Accidental Man around whom every other character thrives, survives amidst the accidents each of them. Austin's tragedy sounds humorous ensconced in multiple tragic events. He is penniless, in an utter state of penury who is distracted by the postmodern life in London. The fun and the laughter is summed up in what George in the novel states, "Austin always exploits Women. He is the sort of man who always manages to find the right woman for the sort of trouble he is in" (Murdoch, 353). Every female character is doomed in his presence from Betty to Dorina and Hester Salce. Mathew at one point comments about Austin and considers his love for Mavis is very funny. The 'funny' and the 'accident' here are representative of surviving a catastrophe, an unassimilable trauma and the subsequent radical displacement. The consequent array of accidents involving Austin is innocently the instruments of bringing such awful unhappiness. The series of Death, actions caused due to moral disintegrity is mocked and parodied. Each character succumbs to tragic events whose complexity is augmented through moral philosophy. Mrs. Monkley who loses her daughter explicates "life is a matter of getting more and more awful things, but this is very hard to get used to. I can't think she is with God. She does not exist anymore, anywhere. This is absolutely funny, isn't it" (Murdoch, 163).

His son, Garth Gibson Grey too follows the footstep of his father wandering aimlessly. Garth is a multi dimensional character whose attitude towards life is overwhelming. He consoles Mrs. Monkley and utters in a philosophical strain that we all have to die and it's a short way through a sad place for the best of us. He observes the immensity of human suffering is the cruelty of God. He puts an emphasis on the rhetoric of the casually absent God. Death is that funny thing in his life, a sign, an accidental sign which leads us to searing darkness. His optimism seems to be overpowering over his pessimism paving way to his kindness and goodness. David J. Gordon claims that, "Death for Murdoch is a great teacher, the ultimate challenge to self-complacency, a far more affecting means of unselfing. Death is what instructs most of us". (Gordon, 120). Death is an all pervading theme in the novel that weaves the beautiful images of suffering. Human life seems entrapped in dense nets of illusion, a condition that seems inescapable. The

absurdity of it all reaches a state of needing truth quite unachievable yet welcoming a predicament that is comic rather than tragic. He becomes a consolation to the heartbroken Gracie too and convinces her that this too shall pass and recovery is possible. Austin has remarried Dorina after the death of her beloved Betty who dies because she gets drowned which sounds trivial as this is proclaimed as an accident as she knew swimming and was a champion in the same. Even the siblings Charlotte and Clara express their disappointment regarding their life. They feel so estranged, alienated, their relationships are tarnished as well. Ludwig on the other hand is a hapless person who is juggling with his nationality along with his dream career in Oxford. He is constantly urged by his parents to render his service by contributing in warfare in the context of the Second World War.

In the third novel *Excellent Women*, Barbara Pym's female characters achieve a central position whose lives are concentrated on the vain clergy, marriage and the churchgoing spinsters. Pym's novels epitomise the high Anglican form of comedy which takes a jibe on the stereotypes and taboos associated with unmarried single women or Spinsters. The 'Excellent' here is deliberate usages to the extremely strong, unwavering, independent women who subvert the deep rooted patriarchal conditioning and choose to tread a path of relentless freedom over unavoidable backlashes. Pym's widows, spinsters, married women, nuns who represent religion hold a central position where as the male characters seem to be side lined. The spinsters and the widows who are perceived as marginal show extreme passion in romance. They feel neglected sometimes yet hopeful of preying upon men especially the vicars, rectors as the town is bedecked with plethora of young clergymen who choose or not choose to marry. Mildred Latbury, Winifred and Dora as spinsters are too naïve simpletons who celebrate spinsterhood only after getting inspired by the casual, bohemian, non conformist approach of Helena Napier as the married woman and Mrs.Gray or Allegra as the widow. Mildred lacks in finding a partner, a lover but her poking fun on the idea of romance through the imagery of food, here spaghetti is ridiculous.

These women manage to dilute the seriousness associated with their identity illuminating their disappointments, failures and illusions exemplified via sympathy and irony. Dora feels agonised yet laughs at the thought that there is nothing much to do when over thirty, marriage seems to be an opportunity to settle down, but marriage is not everything. In another incident, both Dora and Mildred go to a store to buy a dress and Mildred passes a funny remark. She says that brown should be avoided as it does the wrong kind of things to people over thirty unless they are smart. There is an underlying meaning to these jokes on their own personality and social standing as they become misfits who are reviled for remaining spinsters as marriage brings that completeness, wholesomeness. In her essay, 'Barbara Pym's women', Margaret C. Bradham argues that "In the Pym world, marriage forms the basis of the social scale, with married women at the top and spinsters at the bottom. Pym's spinsters confess to feeling like an inferior person, not socially equal or inadequate" (Bradham, 34). Spinsterhood is equated with an empty life, as hollow because there is a growing concern of them being passed over as they grow older.

Mrs Gray's bold attempt to take an interest or confess her desire in Thomas Malory, the vicar is a depiction of her ignorance. This outright action is criticised by Sister Blatt as she believes that the widows have the knack of catching a man and their excellence is imbued in their ability to catch as many preys as possible. The Excellent women especially Mildred and Allegra are devout and not devoted in competing for the attention of the clergy who harbour hopes of being chosen by the clergymen. Helena Napier is a married woman who seeks no reciprocation of love, comfort from her husband who is a soldier. They distance each other from sharing views and emotion, a lack of mutuality leading to a dissatisfaction culminating in separation. Marriage is an achievement believed to dispel loneliness, detachment and aloofness but this is not applicable in the unhealthy relationship between Helena and her husband Rocky. Finding a suitable partner, a suitable attachment is validated immensely where emotions are downgraded which raises a pertinent question why not remain as a spinster without any companion? Loneliness alone becomes their sole partner, a permanent companion that allows her to experience and experiment with the exciting offers of spinsterhood. Mildred then questions the viability of the magical spinsterhood. The female protagonists are juxtaposed to each other sometimes antagonising in a world where compassion is replaced by pettiness. In a candid conversation between Mildred and Allegra, both the women comment upon the triviality and absurdity of two women in their early thirties, eating a good meal and discussing about the easiness or otherwise the uneasiness of their lives, one married and widowed and the other spending life as a spinster. It is ironical too that these women express their disgust, disapproval and jealousy regarding certain acts.

Mrs.Gray is witty yet conniving in presenting the foibles of her younger mates, in regarding Winifred as conventional who is too old school. In another instance, Mildred shows her remorse over her unsuccessful career path as compared to her successful brilliant contemporaries who have accomplished their mission of achieving good careers as well as getting married. She envies the extraordinary academic excellence of her neighbour Helena Napier who is an anthropologist. Her frustration reaches to another level when she mocks the beauty and glamour of Allegra as 'apricot coloured' and whining over her inability to acquire a smooth apricot complexion and tries to negate it by buying a lipstick. Mildred admits that "she had imagined herself to be in love with Bernard Heatherly" (Pym, 122) her old school teenage friend to whom she had an interest on, Thomas Malory, the intimate friend cum vicar, Evarard Bone, the anthropologist become the men Mildred craves and pines for. Mildred succumbs to the mild flirtations, lukewarm tepid affairs of suitable attachments which simply lay down the convenience of relationship and not the passion of romance.

Feminist Comedy illustrates the radicalness in women's humor, a revolutionary step to subvert the male patriarchal language and society. Women's use of comic language is a medium to delineate self empowerment, a source of constructive outlet for a burgeoning emotional energy. The attempt to write comedy might be considered a frivolous act especially when endorsed by female writers. It might be given a secondary or a minor status in the literary canon but what needs to be stressed is writing comedy as an act of survival. Carol Hanberry claims that, "women authors express and deal with hate and humor in an emphatic way as opposed to the aggressive humour characteristic of many male authors" (Berman, 112). Female writers have directed themselves against the problematic structures of culture.

The female writers like Murdoch, Sparks and Pym transmute the aggressive to this empathetic yet boisterous take on humour that redefines the scope of Comedy, significantly Female Dark Comedy. Muriel sparks and Barbara Pym produce the laughter element by slaying it under an emotional disguise and Murdoch on the other hand constitutes laughter with a sense of moral evasion. Feminist

Humour has brought in the opportunity to reformulate and refashion the comic as powerful, savage that acknowledges the strength and force of female humour. It has demolished the once stringent Victorian limitations that hampered the concept of Women's humour. The paradigmatic shift in absorbing feminist humour as rebellious and self affirming is welcoming. This form of humour can be understood as an expression of "a unique female consciousness" (Berman, 123). The humour is produced in the narrative technique also used by the female writers. The trope of an omniscient narrator speaking from a command of past and future, the incoherence in dialogues and statements made by characters, the fragmentation both in terms of the narration and the portrayal of characters, revealing the plot through an epistolary format advocates the forms of satire, parody and ridicule.

These female writers have ensured to appeal the readers through a commitment to invade as well as invent a new reality which itself evokes laughter with shades of terror and horror. Feminist or women's comedy allows the female author to resist insidious masculine takeovers which disallows female participation. Feminist Comedy is used in the service of political activism, enabling women to disrupt the reproduction of gender norms expose gendered social structures and challenge socio- cultural notions of female deficiency. The humour dealt by Female writer's exhibit the power of healing that functions as a magnanimous force to empower their comic voices. It permits to overcome injustices, absurd oppressions or the tyrannies of life generated through unabashedly political, grotesque, destructive and implicit insanities of a socially constructed culture. Amanda Cooper argues, "Women writers are permitted to produce gentle conciliatory comedy with a desire to provide mild entertainment, a textual flirtation, but they have not had the license to produce the kind of challenging, angry, violent, transgressive brand of Comedy" (Cooper, 231). Wendy Wasserstein believes that a lot of comedy is a deflection; women use comedy more as a defense. She emphasises on humour's cathartic potential to release the pain of disappointment and rejection and she also suggests that a sense of humour develops in a person as a result of subjection to life's onslaught. Women's humor then dismantles the existing stereotypes and establishes a female experience traditionally denigrated in comic discourses.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Postmodern subject: the disrupted self in a disturbing reality

Postmodernity is synonymous to the disruption and breaking away of identity in a chaotic reality immersed in absolute turmoil. There is a loss of meaning as their existence is completely disregarded. There is an erosion of values, ethics, meaning which constructs identity as untenable and fragmentary in form and structure. There is a raging conflict between the self whose identity is enmeshed in a political and cultural psychosis. A Postmodern analysis of the subject delineates the destruction of the self who rejects self- identity and self- certainty in a world imbued with atrocities and unrealities. The modern man is devoid of human concerns; he or she is the product of the disturbing conscious reflections repressed by the mind. The self holds a central position as it is formed by an experience, arguably a traumatic one that contributes as Wordsworth says, it is the experiences of trauma that contribute to the growth of an individual remembered and re-conceptualized as aspects of the self. Memory transcends the delusions and illusions of reality causing to generate identity that transforms one's individuality giving birth to a unique human being.

The individual is influenced by various factors from the ravages of World war, religious debates, and racial discriminations. The self is placed amidst multiple random philosophical, ontological, political and postmodern theories to regain stability but sadly culminates in what Friedrich Jameson terms, "the death of the subject itself" (1991: 15). The subject is a fragmented being who has lost his core identity and is in a state of flux, a dissolution where humanism is disregarded. The idea of a unified self is disrupted but the worth of human life is measured rather shaped with instances of humanity. Every character in *An Accidental Man* is disturbed and embroiled in problems both minor and major. Most of the characters undergo a most discomfiting as well as a discomforting experience couched in pessimism. Life and death both are similar dimensions in the survival of the human beings so are the characters in the novel whose life and death take place 'accidentally'. Austin Gibson Grey is a melancholic protagonist whose life terminates as a blissful one, but at the cost of other people's happiness. His life turns him into a pauper, a vagrant self whose presence is also undervalued and underscored. He becomes a vagabond after losing his job in the London Suburbs and now is at the mercy of his friends and relatives. Garth's existence is an accursed one, always doomed to misery whose relations with his son as well as his brother seem alienated, indifferent and unemotional. Garth has no faith in God who also leads a life of rags. He is like an abandoned creature that has never known maternal affection and seeks parental care which he is denied. Garth realizes that life is misery and muddle.

These characters engage in a litany of miseries, often leading them to challenge their existence which raises certain philosophical questions. In an intense, philosophical conversation between Ludwig and Mathew reiterate, "Things that were relative once were absolute now. Tyrannies have broke down, more than die, there is a willingness to rot. One can face suffering and one cannot imagine death" (Murdoch 231). Austin comes to terms with a great lesson that "when the spirit deadens it takes place so slowly, but there are moments when a man can see himself becoming more callous because he has to survive" (Murdoch 134). Life becomes inconvenient, impecunious and tiring. Happiness seems to be a treasured possession in a chaotic world and Austin realizes that ease of spirit, absence of fear are the ingredients of happiness. Despite these disturbances, Mathew offers him with sane pieces of advice where he enlightens Austin to keep some contact with reality. Dorina and Austin are attached to each other through a magnetic force as she is considerate towards him and does not let him feel astray. She is a compassionate soul who is all ears to poor Austin's woes and anxieties. He utters, "Hell- all around me, inside me... I am it, Hell" (221). They languish upon their deplorable conditions which are foregrounded on psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud whose notions of the unconscious of the human mind disrupts and decentralizes the Subject, the 'I'. Freud posits that the unconscious is necessary for human life as it determines our thoughts and actions. It is a repository of the thoughts, impressions and desires that is repressed released through dreams, everyday slip of tongues and other psychological problems. Dorina's childhood trauma of loss and the continued depression even during adulthood gets translated to the fading away of memory and recurrent envisioning of dreams. Her confidence in returning to Mathew for consolation

is a futile venture as she pushes him as a past, placed outside time, envisioned only in her dreams. What remains is blackness, the crime and impossibility. She becomes a victim to an array of lurid dreams.

Lise in *The Driver's seat* is an epitome of a deranged character whose life revolves around the material world and sheer artifice. She perfectly delineates the consequences of a degenerated life devoid of humanity. Lise is portrayed as suffering a type of despair in a world suffering from dearth of reality. The novel begins with an uncertainty regarding the mental stability of the protagonist who enters an apparel store to buy clothes. She asks the salesgirls in a fit of rage, does this stain? To which she responds, but eventually Lise transforms into a hysterical woman, laughing and crying for no reason, apparently the reason could be personal, psychological. She is overburdened; she thrives through a bondage that makes her suffer and craves for aloofness. She is attuned to her inexplicable, irreducible circumstances to which she says, It does not matter. Her dreary, bleak existence is unfathomable along with a perpetual disintegration. Lise breathes as if sleeping, deeply tired, but her eye-slits open from time to time preparing herself for a holiday, a much needed recreational endeavor. The holiday here seems rejuvenating, but in reality this is one that arouses apprehension as she deliberately chooses this for her death.

The references to myriad colors in suggest the turmoil, fragmentation of the self in relation to the psyche. Her character renders a growing awareness that human beings never see the material world in an objective, unmediated fashion that they are caught within and apprehend only human interpretations or constructions of that world. Lise is too brittle, fragile, her emotions are uncontrollable as she is pitied down by her frustration. This novel too embarks upon the philosophical underpinnings in tandem with the postmodern concepts of the subject object simulation. This is evident as “Yin and yang are philosophies. Yin represents space, its colour is purple and its element is water... macrobiotic food” (Sparks, 21). The establishment of a macrobiotic restaurant ensuring probiotic health which is the new norm. This pertains to the postmodern philosophy of Lyotard warning against the dehumanizing effects of contemporary techno-science paving way to Donna Haraway's adoption of a “cyborg identity”(Malpas, 75). Cyborgs, she defines as creatures of social reality as well as a creature of fiction who are “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway, 1991). This resonates with the spread of capitalism demonstrating the comfort and the complexity of humanity that has become lost in hyperreality. The novel's postmodern traits alludes to its narrative format mainly established by an omniscient narrator who declares the death of Lise in the beginning itself. Here, the identity of the subject is espoused as a cyborg identity augmented by technology and its capacity to disrupt humanist ideas of the self- identical subject.

Another text that fulfills the postmodern traits is *Excellent Women* by Barbara Pym who negates the issue of spinsterhood. Spinsterhood too another realm of womanhood that needs to be validated but is degraded. Singleness is reviled as historically too it signified deprivation and always viewed in a negative state. Devaluation of Spinsters harks back to the age of industrialization where the shift from cottage crafts to factory production left unmarried women at home, dependent and undervalued. They were often categorized as bad tempered, greedy, misanthropic, and jealous and most importantly husband hunters and most often handsome young men. Julia spruill states, “a spinster was often a dependent and unwanted guest in the home of a married brother or sister”. Its very hard to acknowledge their singleness as a weapon that can wield more power and make them more vigorous, independent, resourceful and enigmatic. The strong female protagonist of the novel, Mildred Lathbury defies all odds and dilutes the seriousness in being under the clutches of spinsterhood.

Marriage holds an imperative status as it produces wholeness, a completeness in the life of every woman, it becomes a necessity for experiencing life fully. The social position of women is very much challenged in a scenario where marriage is misconstrued as a wholesome and delightful and an idyllic concept. Mildred resides in the backdrop of a rectory, church which hints us to the historical background of the Church of England. The clergymen, the rectory, Parish politics, domestic or amatory intrigue, churchly custom, peculiar parish members hold a central position in the novel. The vicarage is a pivotal setting, sponsor's jumble sales, garden socials; harvest festivals compliment the spiritual sustenance of the people, especially women. Mildred is an active contributor to all these endeavors of the church as the vicarage is a platform for spinsters like her to show their philanthropy and social bonding exhibiting their capability. Pym's excellent women are eponymously excellent as they are intelligent, educated, sensitive, loyal eminently capable of controlling life's vagaries with one exception: their relationship with men. Excellent women are not subordinates nor are they sought as wives but women who are observers, characters incidental to love and marriage. These Excellent women are countered with the depiction of 'Formidable women'. Mildred fits in as an excellent women, on the other hand, Helena, Mildred's neighbour is tagged as a formidable women. They emerge more competent and strong-willed. They are set apart socially, they are physically attractive, volatile, alternately sharp-tongued or sullen or cunning, fickle minded, mean spirited, frivolous and here they master one constant anomaly- men. Russell Ward shows single women to be better adjusted than single men. There are men known for their frailties, many spinsters claim that these men lack in will and perception.

The identity of these excellent women pertains to the necessity of being loved by a man. There is a point when Mildred feels spinsterish and useless, for instance, her deal with married couples is envious, rather haphazard, Helena talks about her soldier husband who arouses a keen interest in him, yet she feels the inadequacy that an unmarried and inexperienced woman always feels. Every spinster like a Mildred identify themselves as objects of repressed desire. These desires are generated by our cultural context where the subject is constructed by the conditions of its existence that are produced by the culture it inhabits. Mildred and her position as a subject is challenged through the concepts of desire and the unconscious. Desires generated by a cultural context produce fantasy when on the brink of fulfilment. Desire can never be satisfied urging the subject to desire for the Other.

**CONCLUSION:-** Black humour as a representational tool to amplify the conflict of memories, hopes, prophecies presentiments, perceptions, ideals and desires can resolve the postmodern conundrum of identity, individuality interspersed in an unusual reality. The serious humour evokes laughter at a given abnormality, any pure verbal contradiction yet holding on to a substantial episode of the serious. It sounds ironical, disdainful but the difficulty and the weaknesses of the character or the circumstances that contribute to this condition is dissimulated in uncovering the pain, trauma, meaninglessness. It should rather be treated as a powerful antidote that stimulates strength, honesty, sympathy and truthfulness and enervates the ill effect of the psychedelic repercussions. Life is a

mixture of joys and sorrows; it always is a beautiful balance of both that can be intimidated by the haunting as well as soul tickling. Black humour serves the purpose of unmasking all vanities, the brutal, harsh reality. Heather Diack in his essay “The gravity of Levity: Humour as a conceptual Critique” states that, “Humour provides aesthetics with a complex subjective dimension that offers crucial insights into the various ways artistes have opened up our vision”( Diack, ). . It is a very common adage that laughter is the best medicine that brings out all the viciousness, negative energy from within caused due to many external and internal factors. Laughter might be assumed as a thoughtless act, something silly and yet provoking. It is a source that leads to unpredictability and unruliness in response to the inanities of the world. Black comedy becomes a catalyst to gauge the philosophical, ontological questions that pervade in the core of our humaneness. It is a palliative measure to conceptualize reality in its real form without any farcical notions. Reality appears horrible in its stern and mysterious crudeness as the images, relationships, feelings, emotions are split and mutilated. Our understanding of reality is blurred and mangled which is decoded and analyzed through a simple yet powerful tool of black humour. The funny in the novels of Murdoch, Sparks and Pym have a caricaturish, ironic and derisive tone provoking us to contemplate and celebrate the idiosyncrasies of serious and astute comedy. The funny manifests the indirectness and reticence in exhibiting the debilitating conditions of humanity where the human is a compound of failure, muddle, sheer chance and fate. It becomes a form to examine our consciousness and laugh at those critically laughable situations without an iota of remorse or pain but simply surpassing the covertly incomprehensible upheaval. Being funny can be suggestive of non assertiveness, self –alienation and a failure to communicate the eccentricities of an individual. The works of Iris Murdoch, Muriel sparks and Barbara Pym display the irony and awareness of absurdity underlying humorous expression overlapping them as horrifying events of comic tragedy.

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